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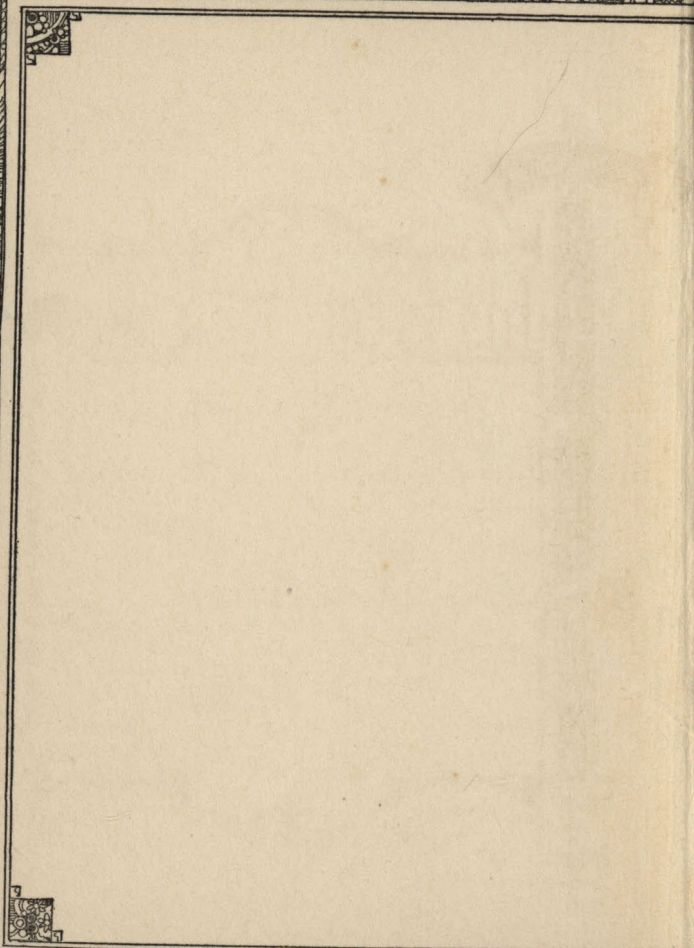
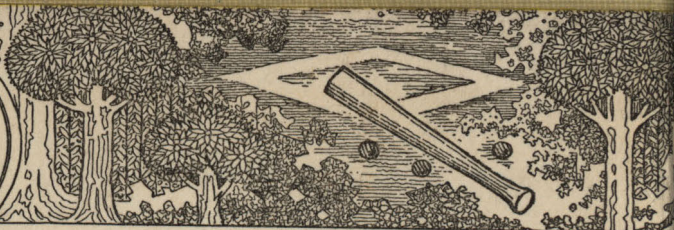
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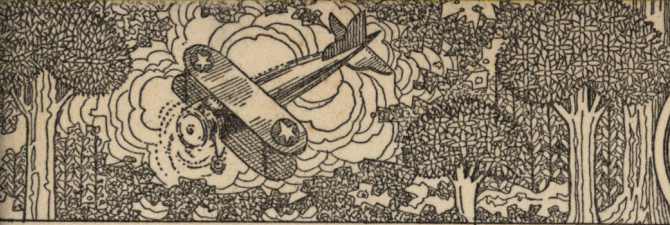


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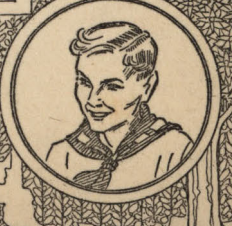
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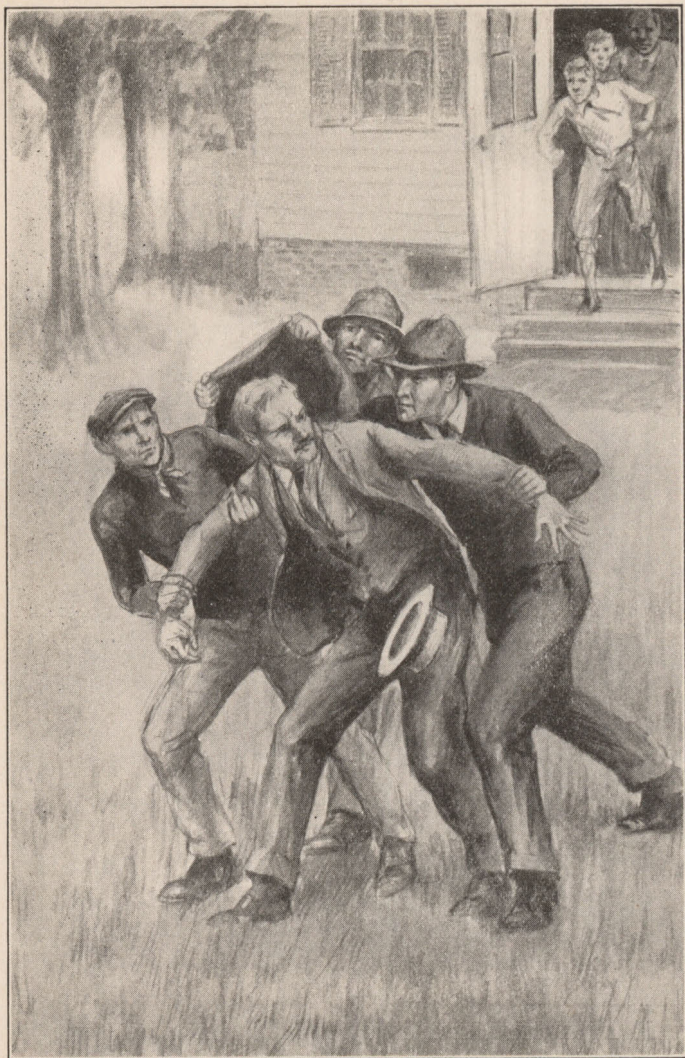
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"BOB DEXTER AND THE RED AUTO MYSTERY."

(Page 115)

BOB DEXTER AND THE RED AUTO MYSTERY

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BOB DEXTER AND THE RED AUTO MYSTERY

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BOB DEXTER AND THE RED AUTO MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

MR. BARDLEY IS AFRAID

"WELL, fellows, see you later, I suppose," remarked Bob Dexter as he was about to part from his two chums at a street corner where their ways separated.

"Yes, I reckon we might as well take in a movie," answered Harry Pierce, barely stifling a yawn though, as yet, it was only late afternoon of a warm, summer day.

"Nothing much else to do," agreed Ned Fuller. "This is getting on my nerves," he added as he leaned against the side of a building in a lazy attitude.

"What's getting on your nerves?" asked Bob.

"There he goes—cross-questioning like a district attorney," chuckled Harry. "What crime do you suspect poor Ned of now, Mr. Detective?" he asked, banteringly.

"Oh, cut out the comedy!" advised Bob, just a little peeved it would seem. "I only asked Ned what was getting on his nerves, for if it's the same thing that's affecting mine we ought to do something about it."

"Didn't know you had any nerves," retorted Ned, still keeping himself upright with the aid of the aforesaid building.

"Bob *has* nerve!" chimed in Harry. "Otherwise he'd never have solved that seaplane mystery."

"Oh, sure," admitted Ned. "Only *nerve* and *nerves* are quite different. What I'm suffering from is the deadly dullness of Cliffside at this season of the year, just when our summer vacations start," he went on. "Here we are at the beginning of a long, hot summer and there's nothing in prospect. Not a thing!" he continued, somewhat bitterly. "I'm sick of it!"

"You forget the movies!" chuckled Harry. "We're going to them tonight and almost anything may happen there."

"Yes," cut in Bob. "We may sit next to some pretty girls and they'll hang around after the show is out expecting us to blow them to sodas."

"Which might not be such a bad idea," commented Harry.

"Oh, I'm sick of girls, too!" declared Ned. "What I want is some more of Bob Dexter's detective work."

"I'm not a detective—never claimed to be!"

snapped Bob with more energy than appeared necessary. "Just because—"

"I'm not going to enter into a discussion with you," broke in Ned. "It's too hot. Besides, Harry and I know what happened when we got on the train of the mysterious Jint San. And it is hardly a year since we helped Gilly Muzzlewig clear up the mystery of the white stones. I mean since you did, Bob—pardon my French."

"You fellows did as much as I in that seaplane business," said Bob. "And I don't mind admitting," he proceeded, "that I wish there was in prospect some of the lively times we have been lucky enough to stack up against in the past few summers. But just at present the depression seems to be still on. So all I can say is that we'll go to the movies tonight and—"

"Tomorrow we'll loaf around, maybe go fishing, play ball, perhaps or do something without any spice or ginger in it," cut in Ned. "I tell you, fellows, I'm sick of it! Why," he went on as, with a hitch of his shoulders he released himself from the building, "I've a good notion to go out and commit some crime myself just to give Bob something to do in solving it."

"None of that!" chuckled Bob. "I don't care for practical jokes."

"Do you mean if I committed a crime it would be a joke?" demanded Ned with sudden energy.

"Of the first water," supplemented Harry.

"You haven't nerve enough to commit a crime, Ned."

"Well, I've got nerve enough to match you for the sodas right here and now!" exclaimed Ned, producing from his pocket a coin with such suddenness, fierce energy that Harry leaped back, expecting a friendly clip on the jaw.

"There's a sporting proposition for you!" declared Bob. "Hop to it, fellows. I'll hold the stakes provided there's enough in them to include me in the refreshments. Well, Harry?" he asked as the latter stood looking at Ned whose clasped hand held a coin.

"Heads," guessed Harry.

"You lose," chuckled Ned, displaying the quarter he had brought forth. "Come on, Bob. We'll soda on him," and he poked Harry in the ribs.

"No, but seriously," went on Ned, as the three chums sat on stools in the soda shop, "can't we arrange to do something this summer? It's fierce to think of having to hang around this burg for the next three months."

"I wouldn't mind a trip of some sort," admitted Harry. "I don't know just what my folks are going to do."

"Same here," came from Ned.

"My uncle seems to think I ought to spend most of the time in his store," said Bob. "Since he gave me this winter off to resume my studies, I suppose it's only fair that I sort of pay him back

by learning more about the general merchandise business. I can't say it appeals to me, but I've got to be fair."

"You wouldn't have to work all summer, would you?" asked Ned.

He and his chum Harry were in rather better financial circumstances than was Bob Dexter, an orphan dependent upon his uncle. Harry and Ned attended the Cliffside Academy where Bob had been a student with them during the term just closed. Bob had left the Academy some time before but, expressing a desire to take up a special course, his uncle had arranged it for him.

"No, I don't suppose I'd have to work all summer," Bob said. "But, even if I didn't, what is there to do around here?"

His chums shook their heads dolefully enough and Ned said:

"Not around *here*, maybe. But if we could get off somewhere—"

"Well, I'm going to get off this chair right now and mosey along home," interrupted Harry. "I've got something to do. See you at the movies," he called back as he slid out of the doorway.

"Hey! Come back!" called Ned.

"What for?"

"You've got to pay for the sodas!"

"That's so—I almost forgot," admitted Harry as he turned back and settled at the cashier's desk.

"Almost forgot is good—very good!" chuckled

Ned. "You'd have gotten clean away with it if I hadn't watched you."

He and Bob now followed Harry outside and, a little later, the three chums separated to go to their respective homes. It was the early dusk of the summer evening when Bob and Harry met later, at the usual corner near the movie theatre, a rendezvous for the chums on the nights when they jointly took in a show.

"Where's Ned?" asked Bob, when the two had loitered about for several minutes.

"I don't know," answered Harry. "He's late—usually he's the first at the old camp-meeting ground. What do you say to walking down toward his house? It isn't far and if we go in without him he may not find us. Anyhow it's a bit early and I don't want to go in at the middle of a picture."

"That's O. K. by me, chief," chuckled Bob. "We'll pick up Ned."

They strolled down the street on which their chum lived, making slow progress for the evening had scarcely begun to cool off from the heat of the day. They expected to meet Ned before they reached his home, but the two chums were at the gate leading up the front walk before they had a glimpse of the late one.

Then Ned came fairly bursting out of the house, with every appearance of great excitement, and not a little alarm.

"Gee, fellows, but I'm glad to see you!" he

fairly gasped. "Come on in! I was just going to get you!"

"Coming to get us!" exclaimed Harry. "What's the big idea, anyhow, Ned? Didn't you promise to meet us at the drug-store clock to go to the movies? Bob and I got tired of waiting and—"

"I know, fellows!" exclaimed Ned, contritely enough. "I'm late and I admit it. I throw myself on the mercy of the court," and he tapped Bob on the arm. "But wait until you hear what happened and then you won't blame me."

"Don't tell me anything has happened—not in this dead burg!" cried Harry, striking a theatrical attitude.

"No, not exactly here, but not far away," Ned stated. "That is it hasn't exactly happened, but it may."

"I hope it isn't serious and that it isn't in the family," spoke Bob.

"Well, you lose on both counts," rejoined Ned. "Though how serious it is I can't say, yet. As for being in the family, it's my old uncle in Portchester."

"Is he dead?" asked Bob, recalling the eccentric individual referred to as Ned's uncle. He was Mrs. Fuller's brother, and lived all alone in a big, rambling house in the small city of Portchester, about two score miles from Cliffside where the three chums had their homes.

"No, he isn't dead," Ned answered, "but he's mighty scared!"

"Afraid?" asked Harry.

"Of what?" Bob wanted to know.

"That's just it—I can't find out," said Ned with a strange, puzzled air that was in contrast to his gay manner of the afternoon. "Look here, fellows," he went on, "what do you say that we cut out the movies—or at least go to the second show, and come in and I'll tell you all that happened?"

"It's a go!" agreed Harry. "'Tisn't much of a show, anyhow."

"Is your uncle inside?" asked Bob as the three turned into Ned's house.

"No, he's in Portchester, or he was a little while ago," stated Ned. "But he's a mighty scared man!"

"How do you know if you haven't seen him?" questioned Harry. "I mean if he's in Portchester and you're here and—"

"Telephone!" spoke Bob, briefly, snapping out the word.

"Telephone?" repeated Harry. "I didn't hear the bell ring."

"Detective Bob Dexter, at your service," spoke Ned with a mock bow toward his gifted chum. "He means, let me explain, Harry, that I learned of the fear of my uncle over the telephone. And he's right. Fellows, all joking aside, something has got my uncle and got him bad! And I wouldn't be surprised, Bob," he went on, seriously enough, "but what you could help in this. Come on in and I'll spill the beans!"

CHAPTER II

A NARROW ESCAPE

"GOOD evening, boys," greeted Ned's mother as he entered with his friends. "It didn't take you long to get them," she added. "I'm glad you found them so soon."

"He didn't find us. We came and found him," chuckled Harry.

"I hope this isn't anything serious, Mrs. Fuller," spoke Bob. "Ned told us something about your brother being afraid of something or something—" he hesitated, not knowing just what to say.

"I don't know how serious it is, or *may* be, perhaps I should say that," went on Mrs. Fuller. "Nothing seems to have really happened up to the time my brother telephoned a little while ago, but he certainly is very apprehensive. He must be to have appealed to Ned, though, as a matter of fact, it is really you whom he wants, Bob."

"Mel!" exclaimed Bob. "I didn't know that he knew me."

"He does by reputation, at least," said Mrs. Fuller. "He did not mention you specifically by name but—"

"Oh, Mother, let me tell it—*please!*" begged

Ned. "Uncle Jason asked for me, you know, and—"

The talk was suddenly interrupted by the tinkle of the telephone bell in the hall.

"I'll answer," Mrs. Fuller offered, "then you can tell your story to your friends, Ned. It's lucky you got in touch with them so soon."

"What in the world does it mean?" asked Bob.

"It's got the movie beat a mile!" gasped Harry.

"Well," Ned began, "it's like this. I was getting ready to come out and meet you fellows when—"

"Ned," his mother interrupted, coming from the hall, "it's for you—the telephone call, I mean."

"If it's a girl," Ned began blusteringly, "she can—"

"It's your *uncle*," broke in Mrs. Fuller.

"Holy cats! Again!" cried Ned making a slide for the telephone as if trying to reach home in advance of a close throw. Then his chums heard him excitedly saying: "Yes, Uncle Jason, this is Ned. Yes, I've gotten hold of Bob Dexter. Sure he'll come—all three of us will come—wait a minute and I'll find out."

Harry and Bob heard the receiver bang against the hall table as Ned dropped it. A second later he was again with his chums gasping out:

"Bob Dexter, how soon can you come with me to Portchester to prevent my uncle from being murdered? How soon?"

The question so took Bob by surprise that, for

the moment, he could think of nothing to say. Mrs. Fuller gasped:

"Not *murdered*, Ned! Oh, don't say *that!*"

"It's what Uncle Jason thinks, anyhow," Ned stated. "Come on, Bob, it's serious enough, anyhow, even if it isn't murder. How soon can you go?"

And while Bob is considering this and while Harry is trying to figure out what it all means, I am going to take just a moment to make you new readers better acquainted with Bob Dexter and some of the mysteries he has already solved.

The first book of this series, "Bob Dexter and the Club House Mystery," introduced this talented lad to his first strange case. The details are all set forth in the volume and it would be unfair to disclose them here. Sufficient to say that Bob Dexter, an orphan lad living with his uncle Joe Dexter, and, at times, working in the latter's general merchandise store in Cliffside, earned his first citation as an amateur detective by discovering what was at the bottom of the strange happenings in the club house.

Bob was a natural detective and his first success made him hungry for more mysteries. He was not an official sleuth and though he often helped the local and other police in strange matters, he had no desire to be a hunter of sordid criminals. Rather he leaned to the strange and mysterious happenings in many of which there was really no crime in the eyes of the law.

At first Ned Fuller and Harry Pierce, the two closest chums of Bob Dexter, were rather inclined to laugh at his efforts. But when he got to the bottom of the Beacon Beach mystery and then solved the one on Storm Mountain, well, it was "a hobby horse of a different color," as Ned expressed it.

Then came the airplane mystery in which was involved the strange Chinese in the golden robe and the terrible Jint San. Bob and his two chums came out of that ordeal with flying colors, thanks to Bob's keen talents.

Just before his present story opens, Bob and his friends had gone on a vacation to the seashore and, almost from the start, they had become involved in a strange series of events in which a seaplane figured. The book, "Bob Dexter and the Seaplane Mystery," gives the full details of the secret of the white stones.

Following the summer in which Bob got the scattered ends of this affair together, he and his chums had resumed their studies during the winter term at the local Academy. Now it was summer again and a period of dullness prospectively loomed until the advent of the strange telephone message that Ned Fuller received from his uncle.

"Will you go, Bob?" asked young Fuller. "Of course you will!" he made haste to say. "But when? Uncle Jason is on the wire now and he's anxious to know. Of course you'll go help him, Bob. It's only a question of when. But I guess

we can make it tomorrow or the next day at most. I'll tell him that."

Before Bob could object, if, indeed, such had been his intention, Ned jumped back to the instrument and called:

"It's all right, Uncle Jason. I'll come up tomorrow or next day and I'll bring Bob Dexter with me. He'll get at the bottom of it. You needn't worry any more."

There was a period of silence, during which Ned was evidently listening to his uncle on the other end of the wire, and then the lad returned to where his mother and two chums waited.

"Say, look here," burst out Bob, "I don't want to throw a monkey wrench into the gears, or anything like that, but—"

"Maybe I did take a little too much for granted, Bob," cut in Ned, "but I had to quiet Uncle Jason in some way. And he won't be satisfied until you go up to his place, Bob. I know you'll go—so will I and so will Harry. It's just the chance we've been waiting for—a detective case for you to work on. What, Bob?"

"Well, if I can help, of course. But what in the world is it about? There's been such a lot of talk, I mean on the 'phone, but I can't get to the bottom of it—"

"Don't blame you," broke in Ned. "It has been a bit disjointed. But that's because Uncle Jason is in such a stew. I've got him quieted down now,

by telling him you're going to help, so I guess I can explain."

"It'll be a charity if you do," murmured Harry. "It's like coming in on the middle of a mystery picture."

"I'll leave you boys to yourselves," commented Mrs. Fuller as she stepped from the room. "I don't suppose," she added with a smile at Bob, "that this is quite as serious as it sounds. But there is no denying that my brother is worried. He is quite an elderly man," she went on, "in fact he is my half brother, my father having married twice, Jason being a son by the first wife. And he is, undoubtedly, rather affected by his age and his business worries, I suppose. So if you can help him, Bob, it will be fine."

"I don't know that I can do anything," said the young detective, modestly, "but I'm willing to try."

"That's the boy!" chimed in Ned. "And now for the yarn. I'll make it as short as I can. In fact there isn't much to tell until we get to Portchester and see Uncle Jason." He then proceeded to relate, part of which was already known to his chums, that this uncle, was a rich but eccentric man living alone in a big house in the distant small city.

"Uncle Jason has plenty of money, but he doesn't spend much of it," related Ned. "I don't really know much about him and I don't believe my mother does, either, as there is such a differ-

ence in their ages. One thing I do know, though, is that Uncle Jason owns the only bank in Portchester."

"Owns a bank!" exclaimed Harry. "I thought a bank was a sort of stock company."

"Well, they are, I guess," Ned admitted. "And probably the how of this case is that my uncle owns most of the stock in the Portchester bank. He doesn't really work in it though he spends some time there, I reckon. But now to get down to brass tacks. I was just coming out to meet you fellows, a little while ago, to go to the movies, as we planned, when the 'phone rang and Uncle Jason was on the wire. As soon as he began to talk I sensed that he was scared—afraid of something or somebody."

"What did he say?" asked Bob who always liked to get at the start of a matter.

"First of all he asked if I would bring my policeman friend up to see him," reported Ned.

"Policeman friend!" repeated Harry, wonderingly.

"He meant Bob," Ned stated. "He doesn't differentiate between a policeman and a detective."

"How did he know I had done detective work?" asked Bob.

"I had told him," Ned replied. "I spun him the yarn about the Jint San. He was mighty interested and, I suppose, when he got in a tight corner himself he remembered about you, Bob. He wanted

me to be sure and bring you up to see him to work on the case."

"But what sort of a case is it?" asked Bob.

"That's what I didn't take the time to find out. All I could gather is that Uncle Jason is mighty scared because, during the last few days, he has been followed, shadowed I suppose you would say, Bob, by some mysterious man or men. He's afraid."

"In connection with the bank, I suppose," put in Harry.

"It might be, yes," Ned admitted. "I didn't ask, for Uncle Jason kept calling for you, Bob. He knows you by name and reputation, at least, though he has never met you, perhaps, though I'm not sure of that."

"I think I saw him once, some years ago, when I went with your mother and you up there," Bob said.

"Perhaps. I guess you're right," Ned admitted. "Anyhow, after the first shock of this fright he's had, my uncle remembered me telling about you, Bob, and he got in touch with me. As soon as I sensed what he wanted, and when I remembered how we fellows were just aching for something like this to happen, I hot-footed it out to meet you and you came along just in time."

"Is that all?" Bob asked, as his chum paused.

"All for the time being, yes. But you'll go up with me and Harry, won't you?"

"Oh, then I'm included, am I?" asked Harry.

"Sure! Three's company in this case."

"Of course," chimed in Bob. "I wouldn't feel like doing anything in this so-called detective business if you fellows weren't with me, in spite of the wise-cracks you sometimes make."

"Forget 'em this time," begged Ned. "Uncle Jason is sure he's going to be put on the spot, or something like that."

"Nonsense!" declared Bob. "Probably some men have been wandering around Portchester, looking for a site for a new bank, and your uncle imagines more than has really happened."

"He doesn't imagine that he's scared, anyhow," stated Ned. "Well, how about it, Bob? When do we go?"

"Tomorrow!" declared Bob, having suddenly made up his mind. "That is if I can arrange it with my uncle at the store."

"We'll put in a word for you," Ned promised. "And I'll have Uncle Jason call up your uncle—they're acquainted I believe."

So it came about that next day, with valises containing changes of clothes that would enable them to remain for a few weeks in Portchester, the three chums set off in Ned's rather decrepit flivver.

"We'll stay at Uncle Jason's house, of course," Ned stated. "He made a point of that. I don't know that it will be very high living," he went on. "We may have to cook our own grub. I guess he rustles his own."

"It'll be all the more fun," Harry said.

"Sure! Like camping out!" added Bob.

They made good time to Portchester and they were turning from the main highway into a side road that, Ned stated, led to his uncle's house, when there careened around the corner a big, red auto that passed so close to the flivver that the hubcaps grazed and had not Ned quickly pulled over to one side there would have been a bad smash.

"Well, of all the nerve!" shouted Ned.

"I'm going to chase those fellows!" shouted Ned, beginning to turn. "I'll make a charge of reckless driving. I'll—

"You'll go right on as you're going!" said Bob quietly. "You've got as much chance to catch that red auto as an ant would a jack rabbit. Go on!"

CHAPTER III

THE FLYING CAR

FOR a moment Ned seemed about to rebel. He stepped hard on the accelerator and the engine throbbed noisily, but as the clutch was out the old flivver merely shivered and shook, as flivvers do, but remained stationary in the road where it had been braked to a sudden, desperate stop.

"I can catch those fellows!" declared Ned, vindictively. "This old bus can go when I step on her."

"I know it," admitted Bob. "But there's no use jolting the old lizzie apart to catch a bunch of speeders who may crack up on their own account if they keep on going the way they were."

"They sure were going!" murmured Harry. "They started to hit seventy as soon as they turned into the main highway. And I don't believe your buzz wagon can do more than sixty-nine and a fraction, Ned."

"She'll come pretty close to it," was the answer. "Gee, but those birds got my goat, nearly running into us the way they did. As it was, I think they dented a hub cap."

"Shouldn't wonder," resumed Bob, calmly.

"But we didn't come up here to chase a red auto. As I understand it, we're going to try to help your uncle."

"Yes, and the sooner we get to him the quieter his nerves will be," Ned suggested. "Not but what I'd like to give those speeders a run for their money though," he added. "I wonder what their hurry was, anyhow?"

"Maybe they're racing to get away after a stick-up," suggested Harry. "I think we ought to follow 'em, Bob. At least get the number of the car."

"No need for that."

"Why?" asked Ned.

"I already have it," and Bob, smiling, showed where he had jotted down the numerals in the lining of his hat, that being the nearest he could come to a piece of paper. "Besides, you don't need the number to pick up that car again."

"Why?" This time it was Harry who made the query.

"Because it's easily spotted. New, sporty, touring car with enough whang-doodles and sporty fan-tods on to let you recognize it on a dark night. Some sports, those birds!"

"And they came out of Uncle Jason's neighborhood," said Ned. "I say, fellows, I wonder if these are the men he's so afraid of?"

"We'll soon find out," commented Bob. "That's why I say it's better to go on and have a talk with him than it is to chase those fellows, only

to lose 'em. You couldn't have turned around and gotten anywhere near 'em, Ned, before they'd be miles away."

"Well, maybe you're right, chief. This is your show, anyhow. I'll let you run it."

"Oh, I haven't any intention of doing that," Bob made haste to say. "Only I think we'd better know what we're shooting at in this case of your uncle before we go off after sporty speeders."

"Yes, I guess that's right," Ned agreed. "It isn't far to my uncle's house now."

Had Bob and his chums only known it there might have been some wisdom in pursuing the insolent riders in the red auto. For, as it developed, that car and its passengers were to figure strangely in the mystery that was, even then, beginning to unfold.

But the boys, even Bob with his special talents, had no means of knowing what fate had in store for him. So, after a few more indignant remarks, in which the characters of the four men in the car were subject to scathing comment, the trio of boys proceeded to journey on in the rattling flivver and soon pulled up in the driveway of an old, country mansion which Ned pointed out as the home of his eccentric uncle.

The house had a depressing effect on the boys from the moment they saw it, depressing in spite of their high spirits and the fact that it was a beautiful, warm, sunny day.

The residence of Jason Bardley, retired, holder

of the majority of the stock in the Portchester Bank, was an old, square residence of a type popular fifty years ago. It was three stories in height, and was topped by a square tower which seemed like a sentry box stuck atop the roof whence watch might be kept over enemies approaching from the four points of the compass.

The house had not been painted in several years. Originally it had evidently not been of a bright color and with the passage of time it had taken on a sombre hue like the rusty, mourning garments of some old woman. The windows were obscured by dark shades, all of which, as the boys approached the place, appeared to be pulled down to the very sills.

"Big enough place," remarked Harry.

"Yes," admitted Ned. "Nobody seems to know why Uncle Jason needs so much room just for himself. But he always was that way. It was the old homestead and he never would give it up. I guess, because it's so big, is why he can't keep any servants. It would need three or four to keep this place up as it ought to be."

"He doesn't believe in light, either," commented Bob. "Look at those windows—as dark as pockets."

"Oh, Uncle Jason only uses the back of the house," remarked Ned. "Mother told me that as I was coming away. We'll have to go around to the back door to get in. I guess he's at home for I telephoned that we'd get here about now."

"It doesn't seem as if such an old-fashioned house would have a 'phone," remarked Harry.

"It's only been put in lately," said Ned. "I guess my uncle had it put in for the same reason he wanted us to come up—because he's afraid of something—or somebody. Well, let's go."

"Shall I leave the car here?" asked Harry, who took a turn driving.

"Yes, until we figure out what to do with it. There's a barn back of the house. I guess we can garage it there," Ned answered.

"Yes, there it is," Bob said, pointing to a barn that was as gloomy and mysterious in appearance as was the house. The boys saw it as they made their way along a weed-encumbered path that bound the mansion like a grotesque snake.

"Who's there?" demanded a cracked, suspicious voice as Ned knocked at the back door, opening upon a sagging, decrepit porch.

"It's me, Uncle Jason," the boy answered. "And I've brought Bob Dexter with me."

"Oh! All right! Wait a minute!"

Footsteps were heard back of the ancient portal, then came a rattle of a chain and the turning of a key in a rusty lock. The door squeaked on rusty hinges as it was slowly opened to disclose, in the aperture, the whiskered face of an old man.

"Oh, Ned! Come in," he smiled a welcome which made his rather stern face seem a bit more human-like. The door swung wider and the three

boys entered. "Didn't mean to keep you waiting," went on Mr. Bardley as he closed, locked and chained the door while the three lads stepped into the kitchen which was furnished in a cozy, old-fashioned style. A somewhat modern range occupied the space where once had been a large, open hearth. "But I have to be careful," went on Ned's uncle. "There's been strange doings around here of late and I don't know what the danger is. I need some young blood about me—mine's getting old—old and stagnant—too old. I can't cope with 'em any more. That's why I sent for you, Ned, and the policeman—which one is he?"

"Bob Dexter isn't a policeman by any means, Uncle Jason," Ned replied with a laugh. "But he has done some detective work. And if you have anything in that line up here—"

"I've got plenty!" exclaimed the old man with more energy than he had displayed at any time since the advent of his visitors. "I'm in danger of my life, I tell you. And my money, too, and that's life to me—it's all I've got to live for," he said, with what would have been a pathetic air had it not been so mercenary.

"Well, we're here to help you," stated Ned, trying to infuse a note of cheer into his voice. "And when Bob Dexter begins working on this case—"

"He can't begin working any too soon!" interrupted the old man. "There's danger!"

"What kind, Uncle Jason?" asked Ned.

"Different kinds."

"Well, Bob will fix everything. He's—"

"I say, look here!" broke in Bob himself. "I'm no wonder-worker! Don't give your uncle the idea that I can do things I can't."

"You'll do 'em, Bob!" declared Ned. "You've done it before."

"But what's it all about?" asked the young detective, not unreasonably. "I can't work in the dark."

Unconsciously, perhaps, he looked toward the dark front of the house. The kitchen was light enough but beyond that the old mansion seemed shrouded in gloom.

"I don't want too much light," mumbled the old man. "It isn't safe, for one thing, and I don't like it for another. Lights cost money and I don't need 'em. But I'm glad you've come, Ned," he went on, placing a gnarled hand on his nephew's arm. "And I'm glad you brought this young detective with you. There'll be plenty for him to detect when he gets started."

"That's what I'd like to do," stated Bob. "Not that I claim to be any great shakes in solving mysteries," he added, modestly, "I've had some luck, and I guess a lot of it was pure luck. Then, too, Ned and Harry have helped me."

"He's laying it on thick," chuckled Ned.

"But," Bob resumed, "I'd like to know where I'm at. You spoke of danger, Mr. Bardley."

"Yes, I did. There is danger, I tell you!"

"What kind? From what source?"

"Well, for one thing, from a big, red auto. It goes smashing around our roads here and only yesterday I was nearly smashed by it."

"A red auto!" cried the boys in a chorus.

"Yes. With four men in it!"

"It must be the same car!" exclaimed Bob with a look at his chums.

"I thought we should have followed it," Ned said with just a little manner that might be taken as "I told you so, Bob."

"Those men are after me!" went on Mr. Bardley. "I tell you, boys, there's that about this red car—"

He paused, suddenly, and through the old mansion, extraordinarily loud in the sudden silence, a telephone bell rang.

Opening a pantry door which, to the surprise of the boys, held the instrument, Mr. Bardley called frantically into the transmitter:

"Hello! Hello! Yes, go on! I'm listening!"

Silence followed, broken only by the rattle of the diaphragm of the receiver held to the old man's ear. What words came through it the boys could not distinguish. But Ned's uncle suddenly clicked the receiver back on the hook and cried:

"The flying car! The flying car! I knew it!"

Then he ran hastily from the kitchen toward the darkened front of the house, leaving the bewildered boys to stare at one another.

CHAPTER IV

PUZZLED

"WHAT do you make of that, Bob?" asked Harry in a low voice.

"Make of what?" countered Bob, obviously to gain time in which to collect his thoughts.

"Of what Ned's uncle said just now," Harry went on.

"And what he did, too; running away as if some one was after him," added Ned. "This sure is a mystery with a vengeance, Bob, and right hot off the bat—as soon as we get here."

"Well, we expected it, didn't we?" Bob wanted to know with a grin.

"Yes," Ned admitted, "but I didn't look for just this. I never saw my uncle act like this before. Of course I don't know him very well, for he hardly ever visits us and we seldom come here. But he sure acts queer. What do you make of it, Bob?"

"Yes, let's hear what the detective has to say," challenged Harry.

"Look here, you fellows," countered Bob, suddenly. "I didn't ask you to call me a detective. It's your own doing, but I'll be hanged if I'm go-

ing to have my case spoiled by shooting at a mark before I've got my gun loaded."

"Atta boy!" commended Ned.

"I didn't mean to force your hand," apologized Harry. "But we've got sort of used to having you solve puzzles and I thought maybe you could figure this one out. What is Ned's uncle afraid of in that red auto?"

"I'll be honest with you and say I don't know," Bob slowly replied. "I'm as much puzzled over this as either of you are. There's no use saying I understand it for I don't."

"It wouldn't be fair to expect you to," put in Ned. "We just got here. You haven't had time to size up the situation."

"That's true," agreed Harry.

"Thanks for your consideration," murmured Bob. "It's true, though. There's no use jumping at conclusions. We haven't enough clues to work on yet."

"What's the first thing to be done?" asked Harry. "Do you think we ought to follow your uncle, Ned, and see where he ran to and if we can help him?"

Ned paused a moment before replying. He and his chums looked about the kitchen in which they stood and whence the eccentric man had fled a moment before with that startled cry about the red car. There was nothing gloomy or mysterious about the kitchen. The boys, though they did not say so, were glad on this account for they

were all good eaters and it was reassuring to note that at least there was one room in the gloomy, old mansion where they could gather and prepare their food during their strange visit.

Ned's gaze went to the door through which his uncle had run in such seeming fear. It led to the main part of the house—a part shrouded in almost complete darkness, even in daylight, because of the dark shades pulled all the way down. Then Ned spoke and said:

"I don't believe we'd better go after him. Uncle Jason asked us, particularly Bob, to come out here and help him solve some mystery that, he believes, endangers his property, if not his life. Well, here we are and, almost the first crack, my uncle gets a strange telephone message, says something about a red car that we, ourselves, have reason to remember, and then he goes away. I'm thinking he'll come back soon and explain—that is, explain his own actions, So I guess we might as well make ourselves comfortable here until Uncle Jason comes back."

"How would it be to scout around and see if there's anything to eat?" suggested Harry.

"You might have known he'd suggest that," chuckled Bob.

"I'm afraid there won't be any chicken livers," added Ned. "I forgot to warn my uncle to lay in a supper for you, Harry," and he winked at Bob over this mention of Harry's particular fondness.

"I'm no more fond of eating than you two lads," countered Harry. "But you know as well as I do that it will soon be supper time. And if we're going to eat we've got to have grub. I don't mind doing the cooking. I believe you said your uncle didn't keep a servant, Ned."

"He doesn't as far as I know. Didn't the last I heard. But since this thing has happened there's no telling what staff of servants he may have. Though it doesn't sound as if there was much life that way," and he nodded toward the front of the darkened house.

"Well, it won't do any harm to look around," went on Harry. "You fellows may laugh but I'll have the laugh on you if I can eat and you can't."

"It's all right, Harry," said Ned, soothingly. "We must eat and I think my uncle expects it of us. Sure, let's go ahead and see what's in the pantry and ice box, if he has such an up to date arrangement as that. What do you say, Bob?"

"I say go to it and I'll have a go at trying to find out who that message came from."

"How you going to do that until my uncle comes back?" Ned wanted to know.

"By telephone, if I can," Bob answered moving to the instrument. "I suppose it's all right to use this?" he asked Ned.

"Oh, sure! You're here to solve this puzzle if you can and my uncle would want you to do just as you please. Hop to it."

While Ned and Harry rummaged in the pantry,

locating an old-fashioned ice box, which find Ned announced with a shout, Bob took the receiver off the hook and when the central girl's voice asked what number he wanted Bob replied:

"Some one called this number a few minutes ago. Can you get the party back for me?"

"Not unless you can give me the number."

"I can't do that—I don't know it."

"Then I'm sorry, but I can't help you. If you could give me the name—"

"I can't do that, either," Bob answered with a little laugh. "Is there no way of telling, from your office records, who called this number a little while ago?"

"No, there isn't. It was an incoming call, you see. If you had called a number from your end I would have a record of it. The record of calls coming to you is in the central in which it originated. So unless you can tell me that—"

"I can't," Bob interrupted. "Never mind. Sorry to have bothered you."

"It was no bother—thank you," murmured the girl's voice and Bob hung up.

"Blank wall there," he remarked as his chums came into the kitchen from the large, back pantry. "How'd you fellows make out?"

"Swell," Harry answered. "There's a pile of grub. Enough to last all summer and a good variety. We shan't starve, anyhow."

"Not with you to do the cooking," chuckled

Ned. "Well, Bob, so you couldn't get any information?"

"Not over the 'phone. No. But I'm hoping that when your uncle comes back—"

"Here he comes now!" interrupted Ned as footsteps echoed ghostily in the dark, front part of the old mansion. "And he's got somebody with him!" he added. "That's funny!"

A moment later Mr. Bardley entered the kitchen, followed by a gigantic Negro.

"Boys, this is George, my cook," explained Ned's uncle to the obviously surprised lads. "Also my bodyguard," he added. "George, this is my nephew, Ned Fuller," and he indicated him. "This is his chum Harry Pierce and the other lad," nodding to Bob, "is the detective I told you I had sent for."

"Pleased t' meet up wif yo' gen'men," spoke George in a deep, rumbling voice. "Fust time I ever met up wif a real detective," he went on, evidently somewhat in awe of Bob. "An' I reckon we all needs suffin' laik yo' all 'round yeah. Dey's shore some mighty queer doin's."

"Too much so!" muttered Mr. Bardley. "That's why I hired George," he went on, explaining to the boys. "He's not only a good cook but I'd hate to be the man he tackled."

"Looks as if he could take care of three or four at a time," commented Harry.

"He can!" snapped Mr. Bardley. "As for cooking—well I haven't forgotten that you boys

will want to eat. I don't go in much for table manners myself, but since I asked you out here to solve this mystery I thought it only fair to provide the food and some one to cook it. You might not like my style."

"Very good of you," murmured Harry who had been much pleased with what he saw in the pantry. "I generally do the cooking when we fellows are camping out, but I'm just as glad to have some one else do it, particularly since we have to help Bob solve this mystery."

"Say, Uncle Jason," exclaimed Ned, "don't you think you ought to tell us more about this—so Bob will have something to work on?"

"I will tell you," said Mr. Bardley. "But I wanted to have George on hand in case they came back."

"In case who came back?" asked Bob, beginning to take the lead now.

"Those men in the red auto."

"But judging from the speed they were moving at when they left here a little while ago, they can't get back very soon," Bob said.

"You don't know that car!" exclaimed the old man, and he looked about as though apprehensive.

"That's another thing that puzzled us," went on Bob. "You were at the telephone just now—some one called you and you spoke of the flying car. Do you mind telling us what you meant?"

"I meant just that," Ned's uncle said. "That

red car must fly to get from one place to another as fast as it does. It was on the other side of the lake just now, George."

"How yo' all know dat, boss?"

"Murchison telephoned me."

"Do you mean to say," broke in Bob, "that the red auto with four men in it, the car that nearly ran us down when we were turning in here, was on the other shore of the lake when you got that 'phone message?"

"That's just what I mean to say!" declared Mr. Bardley firmly. "That's why I called it a flying car."

"But look here!" exclaimed Ned. "Lake Winabog is at least seventy-five miles in circumference, Uncle Jason, that is by way of the shore road which follows the indentations. How could a car speed say half that distance in say ten minutes, which it must have done if it was on the opposite shore from here. It's been only about ten minutes since it nearly ran us down here in Portchester and now you say you had word that it was in—"

He paused, not knowing which to name of the several small villages on the other side of Lake Winabog. But his uncle supplied the information.

"It was in Clayville," said Mr. Bardley, "fully forty miles from here."

"Forty miles in ten minutes!" exclaimed Bob. "That's at the rate of two hundred and forty

miles an hour. Impossible for a car to make that speed on the roads around here."

"But it did it, I tell you!" persisted Ned's uncle. "Murchison telephoned me from Clayville that the car passed him at top speed."

"It might have been a similar car," suggested Bob.

"It might have been but it wasn't," countered Mr. Bardley. "For the same four men were in it—the same men I hired George to protect me from. And don't you fail me, George!"

"I won't, boss. But de trouble is t' get at 'em. Dey shore am slippery birds in dat flyin' car."

"So, boys, particularly you, Bob, you see what you're up against," resumed Mr. Bardley. "When a gang of scoundereles appear in a red auto in Portchester at one time and, ten minutes later are forty miles away, it means something, doesn't it?"

"It means that I've got to go some to solve the puzzle," Bob frankly admitted. "And since I don't know much about this part of the country I think I'd like to go out and have a look at this lake. Is it far from here?"

"No," Ned stated. "My uncle has his own private dock. The water is about five minutes walk from here. We'll just about have time to go down and take a look before dark. And you're going to get supper, are you, George?"

"Shore am, boss!" The Negro grinned cheerfully.

"All right, boys, go out and look around," suggested Mr. Bardley. "I'll stay here—with George. No telling when those fellows may come back. And at supper I'll tell you why I fear them. Don't be long away," he begged, and again there crept into his voice a note of fear."

Bob and his chums were turning to leave the kitchen when Mr. Bardley suddenly sprang to the outer door and shot the bolt.

"Some one's coming!" he gasped.

CHAPTER V

THE NOISE IN THE DARK

THERE sounded a loud knock on the door, a second after the old man had shot the bolt and he jumped aside with what would have been laughable haste had it not been so serious.

Silence fell upon those in the kitchen and, for a moment after Mr. Bardley had leaped so nimbly aside, no one moved.

The knock sounded again, echoing through the quiet house like thunder in a dark glen. A jovial, disarming voice called:

"Here's your lobsters, Mr. Bardley!"

Ned laughed, a strange, relieved chuckle of mirth, and said:

"I forgot to tell you fellows, but I mentioned to Uncle Jason that on our last mysterious expedition at Belport we had plenty of seafood, so he very kindly offered to get some lobsters for us. And I guess they have arrived."

"Lobsters!" echoed Bob, wonderingly.

"Lobsters!" chuckled Harry. "Good! I never thought we could get 'em around here."

"They come iced in barrels, by express," explained Mr. Bardley. "I'll get you lads anything

you like to eat—in reason,” he rather hastily added. “All right, Porter—I’ll open the door in just a moment,” he informed the unseen knocker who was again applying his knuckles to the panels of the portal.

“Guess you must ‘a’ thought I was a bill collector or th’ tax man, didn’t ye, Jason?” chuckled the lobster-deliverer, who proved to be from the store of the local fish man. “These jest come in,” and he indicated a huddled mess of greenish-black lobsters some of which were moving their feelers, claws and legs amid the chopped ice.

“I didn’t know who it was, but I don’t take any chances, Porter,” remarked Mr. Bardley. “Put ‘em in the ice box,” he went on, nodding toward the big pantry. “George’ll know how to serve ‘em I dare say.”

“Broiled, boiled or salad, whichever de young gen’mans laiks,” chuckled the big Negro, his eyes shining with evident pleasure as he saw the seafood. He apparently liked his profession, or at least the culinary side of it.

“Got company, Jason?” asked Porter Amerdow, the fishman’s helper, as he came out of the pantry having put away the lobsters. He made the inquiry with the freedom that prevails among country folk who do not consider it inquisitive to inquire about a neighbor’s personal matters. “I reckoned you’d be havin’ company when I heard you’d ordered these lobsters. Don’t many around here go in fer ‘em.”

"Yes, it's my sister's boy and a couple of his chums—they're going to visit me a spell," admitted the old man with a glance at the boys, who also nodded in acknowledging the bow from Porter.

"Well, order as much stuff from us as ye like, Jason," chuckled Porter. "We like t' get th' business."

He turned to leave with his emptied basket, taking with him part of the fishy smell that had permeated the kitchen. For a moment after Porter's departure Mr. Bardley looked at the closed door, as if debating with himself whether or not to bolt it again. Then, thinking better of it, he said:

"You boys had better go out now if you want to see the lake before it gets too dark to take it all in. Not that it'll be dark for some time yet, though," he added. "But it sometimes fogs up."

"Yes, come on, fellows!" called Ned and the three went outside.

As they walked away from the old house, going through the long, back lot that led down to the edge of the lake, Bob turned to get a view of the ancient mansion. He and his chums noticed that while the front windows were darkened by heavy, green shades, the back windows were only obstructed, for half their length, by shades pulled down only this far. And the rear shades were not as heavy as those in front.

"Looks as if your uncle wanted to keep a lookout on the lake side," commented Harry.

"Sure does," admitted Ned.

"And he has a telephone up in the watch tower," added Bob.

"How do you know?" asked Ned.

"There's the wire," and Bob indicated one that extended from the cupola, or square tower, atop the old house, in the direction of the lake, the outer end losing itself amid some tall trees.

"So it is!" exclaimed Ned. "Looks as if my uncle had a wire down to his boat house."

"Has he a boat house?" Harry inquired.

"A small one, yes, though, as I remember it, his navy consists of only an old tub-like barge as heavy as a scow to row."

"I didn't know your uncle's place was so near the lake," remarked Bob as they came within sight of the water.

"Oh, yes, it's always been this way as long as I can remember," Ned answered. "My uncle used to be very fond of the water, though whether he goes out on it now, in his old scow, I can't say."

"I didn't know Lake Winabog was so large," commented Harry as they approached a small boat house built over a dock. "It's quite a body of water."

"Not bad," Ned admitted. "It isn't so very wide or so very long, but it has a very deeply indented shore line. It's between seventy-five and a hundred miles around it, if you measure every

little bay and cove, I believe. And that's what makes it so strange that a car, following the shore road, could get from one side of the lake to the other in such a short time."

"Mighty queer," agreed Harry and, as if by pre-arrangement they both looked at Bob.

"No you don't!" chuckled the young detective. "I'm not going to commit myself by guessing how it's done."

"That's what you're here to find out—at least one of the things," commented Ned. "It is mighty queer though, isn't it, for us to see the red auto here and, ten minutes later to learn that it was seen in Clayville, which is across there," and he pointed over the blue water of Lake Winabog which was then sparkling in the setting rays of the sun slanting over the fringe of trees.

"It doesn't seem possible that an auto could do it," remarked Harry. "Judging the distance around the end of the lake it's fully forty or fifty miles."

"It hasn't yet been proved that such a thing happened," said Bob in a quiet voice.

"My uncle said so," spoke Ned.

"He said some man, Murchison by name, told him," gently corrected Bob. "Murchison may have been mistaken. By the way, who is Murchison?"

"I don't know," Ned replied. "Some friend of my uncle. He must have some new friends. I really don't know much about them. It was as

much a surprise to me as it was to you to see him come down stairs with that Negro George."

"And to think of him ordering lobsters for us," added Harry.

"Uncle Jason has changed a lot," remarked Ned. "It's all very queer. I'm glad you came along, Bob."

"So am I," Harry said.

"Better wait until you see if by luck, chance or even by hard work, I get on the trail of anything," chuckled Bob. "And don't forget," he added, looking at his chums, "I'm depending on you fellows to get at the bottom of the red auto mystery as much as I did when we were captured by the seaplane crooks."

"We'll help!" offered Ned. Then, as he looked in the side window of the boat house, which was built as part of the dock, he exclaimed: "Gee! Look in there!"

"What is it?" cried Harry. "The red auto?"

"No, but a swell, new motor boat—regular little cabin cruiser!" exclaimed Ned. "I never knew my uncle had this. Say, the old boy is getting to be a regular sport!"

"Nifty tub all right," agreed Bob and Harry as they looked in to where the craft floated in a sort of basin made by cutting away part of the dock. The end doors of the boat house were closed and locked, as the boys soon discovered, so they could not enter to obtain a closer view of the new boat.

"I'll have to talk to Uncle Jason about this," Ned remarked as they went to the end of the dock and idly threw some stones into the water.

"Hope we can get some rides in it," murmured Harry.

"Oh, we will!" Ned promised.

"It's a nice lake," remarked Bob as they gazed across the beautiful body of blue water dotted here and there with pleasure craft of one kind or another, for the shores were lined with camping sites and small towns.

"Any fish in it?" asked Harry.

"I guess so," Ned answered. "We'll have a go at finding out as soon as I can persuade my uncle to let us take that boat."

They remained a little while on the dock, and Bob was seen to be closely examining the adjacent shores, the while casting his gaze at the distant town of Clayville. But with all the looking that the boys did they could figure no way in which an auto could travel around one end of the lake and cover a distance of forty miles in ten minutes.

"You've got a man-size mystery on your hands this time, Bob," commented Ned.

"Well, I've got two good assistants to help me," chuckled the young detective. "What I'd like to find out, though," he went on, "is what is at the bottom of your uncle's fear of these men in the red auto. It seems—"

"Hark!" suddenly interrupted Ned, raising a hand for silence.

A shout sounded in the direction of the old house.

"He's calling us!" Ned exclaimed, starting to run. "Hurry, fellows! Something may have happened!"

They speeded up the slope from the lake only to find Mr. Bardley calmly waiting for them near the back porch, while from the kitchen came the appetizing odors of a meal in preparation.

"Is anything the matter, Uncle Jason?" asked Ned.

"Oh, no," was the answer. "Nothing's happened since you boys went down to the dock. But I didn't want you to stay away too long—besides, supper's nearly ready. So I called you."

"It's a good thing you did," spoke Bob, with a wink at his chums. "We were just thinking of trying out that fine little speed boat you have down there."

"Yes, Uncle Jason," added Ned, quick to take advantage of this opening. "I didn't know you had this. When'd you get it? May we try it out?"

"I only got it the other day," was the answer.

"For fishing?" asked Bob.

"No," was the slow answer. And then, to the surprise of the boys the old man added: "No telling when I might have to get away by water. I want the boat handy! But come in! We'll eat and then I'll tell you all there is to tell and maybe

then, young man," he said, looking at Bob, "you can tell me what to do. For I confess this thing is getting on my nerves!"

The boys wanted, desperately, to ask him, then and there, what it all meant. But he seemed to want to avoid the subject for the time being, so they respected his wishes.

George served a good meal in the old, big kitchen, Mr. Bardley giving as an excuse for not using the dining room, that the nearer food was served to the stove it was cooked on the better it was. The boys let it go at that.

"This is fun!" murmured Harry, speaking with some difficulty as his mouth was pretty well filled.

"What is?" asked Ned.

"Eating and sort of camping out like this. I like it, don't you?"

"It's all right—so far," Ned agreed.

"What do you mean—so far?"

"Well, there's no telling when something may happen."

"That's what we came here for, isn't it?" asked Bob.

"Sure!" agreed his chums as they went on eating.

"And now, my lads," began Mr. Bardley as they sat about the kitchen table, when George had cleared away, washed the dishes and had taken himself to a distant part of the house, "now I'll tell you all I can of what has happened to me."

It was dark by this time, darker than the hour

warranted for a storm began to brew soon after the sun went down. There was a distant muttering of thunder and fitful flashes of lightning that penetrated to the room around the edges of the dark shades Ned's uncle had pulled down at the first indication of evening.

"Well, boys," began Mr. Bardley as he settled himself in an easy chair in a corner, and Bob noticed that this corner was far from any window or door, "it's about a month ago that I first noticed these men in the red auto. They—"

Suddenly the silence of the dark, old house was shattered by a moan or groan that seemed to echo from one of the upstairs rooms.

"What's that?" cried Ned, jumping from his chair.

CHAPTER VI

THE OLD SHACK

ONCE again, through the mysterious, old house, shrouded in gloom save for the lighted kitchen, there echoed that disconcerting groan or moan. The boys could not determine which.

"Do you hear that?" whispered Ned, who was half way to the door by this time—the door leading into a hall beside the dining room—a hall that also led to the foot of the front stairs. "Did you hear it?"

"Could we very well help it?" asked Harry.

"We still hear it," said Bob.

It was true enough. The strange, moaning sound was even louder now and as Ned opened the door it was more plainly in evidence. It came from one of the upper rooms—a part of the mansion the boys had not yet penetrated.

"Do you know what that is, Uncle Jason?" asked Ned.

Mr. Bardley swallowed once or twice, rather, he made an attempt to swallow but with a throat so dry from sudden fright that he was making only poor work of it. Then through his lips that

he managed to finally wet with his tongue, he whispered:

"I don't know what it is! They must have gotten in! Boys, you'll have to fight now! Here!"

With a quick motion he produced from some pocket of his rusty, ancient garments a modern automatic.

"There's more of 'em in that drawer under the table," he said hoarsely to Bob. "Better get 'em out! I've been waiting for this!"

Quickly Bob slid out a drawer that had, evidently, been recently built beneath the kitchen table off which they had dined on lobsters so recently. There lay three automatics, identical in pattern with the one Mr. Bardley held in rather a shaking hand.

"They're loaded!" he warned.

"But do we need them?" asked Bob. "You can't shoot a *noise*!"

"You can shoot the man making it!" snapped Ned's uncle, "and that's what I aim to do. Boys, help me!" he pleaded in what seemed a pathetic voice.

"But look here," put in Bob as his chums stood behind him gazing into the open drawer at the sinister weapons. "Men who are bent on desperate work don't give warnings by groans or moans. And I have my doubts about their being so."

"What are they then?" asked Harry.

"Listen!" cautioned Ned.

Again came those strange sounds from the upper darkness.

"Does that Negro, George, sleep up there, Mr. Bardley?" asked Bob.

"Of course he does!" was the quick answer. "I got him here to help protect me—especially at night. Night is the worst time. Of course George sleeps up there. But what of it? You don't think they've got him—do you?" he asked in sudden alarm.

"No, they haven't got him," said Bob with a smile. "The only thing the matter with George is that he's sleeping on his back and probably has a touch of night-mare. He's snoring beautifully."

"*Snoring!*" gasped Ned as he withdrew a hand he had stretched out to pick one of the automatics out of the drawer.

"*Snoring!*" cried Harry. "Well, if a man can snore like that—"

"*Snoring!*" echoed Mr. Bardley. "Say, that's just what it is!" he exclaimed a moment later as unmistakable evidence that the strange sounds were those made by a heavy slumberer. "George told me he generally slept pretty soundly. 'I've got a specially loud bell at his bedside I can ring when I want to awaken him. But I guess you're right, Bob. Those are snores.'"

"Didn't you know he snored when you hired him?" asked Ned as the sounds died away, probably because the Negro had changed his position.

"I should think if you had heard those sounds before you would have remembered them."

"Never heard 'em before," snapped Mr. Bardley. "This is the first night George ever slept here. I only hired him yesterday when I knew I was going to have you boys here. Well, if that's all it is, I guess I don't need to worry," and with rather a shamed-faced air he put the weapon back in his pocket.

"Do you really anticipate an attack in the night?" asked Bob.

"Boys, I don't know what to think or do," was the answer. "I started to tell you all about it when that noise startled me. Are you sure it's George snoring?" he asked as now only silence was in evidence above stairs.

"We'll take a look and find out," decided Bob.

"There are candles on the mantle," directed Ned's uncle. "I don't believe in electricity. Anyhow it would cost too much to have it put in this old house. Take some candles if you're going up."

"We have our flashlights," said Bob, for the boys never traveled without these useful pocket torches. "They're brighter and safer than candles. Come on, fellows," he suggested and, with their flashlights aglow they went up the stairs, with Mr. Bardley to direct them, for they were unfamiliar with the old house, even Ned never having been much within it owing to his uncle's peculiarities.

"George sleeps in there," said Mr. Bardley as the party traversed a hall off which opened many bed rooms. He indicated a room at the very end of the hall. From it came unmistakable snores, though not as loud nor as weird as the first alarming ones. But they were sufficient to vindicate Bob's theory. "You boys can take your pick of any rooms up here," went on Ned's uncle. "They've all got beds in and they're furnished, but some of 'em haven't been used for a long time."

"Where do you sleep?" asked Bob as they were turning away from the vicinity of the apartment where George slumbered.

"Up there." The old man pointed skyward.

"Up there?" echoed Bob. "You mean—"

"In the cupola—yes. It's the safest place since this trouble began. I can barricade the stairs leading up and once there I can have a good look all around. Can't anybody come toward my house without me seeing 'em, except of course, after dark. Then they'd have trouble coming at me."

"And if you had to escape," suggested Bob with a smile. "I suppose you could telephone down to the boat house and—but who's to run the boat for you?" he asked suddenly, as he recalled that there was no one on the dock—at least the boys had seen no one.

"I've got to attend to that later," was the answer. "You were clever to spot that telephone wire. Yes, I can call up the dock from my tower

room. But, as you say, I'll need a man to be on duty to run the boat. I aim to have Murchison do that as soon as he gets back; in a couple of days that'll be. Meanwhile I reckon you boys could run that boat if it had to be run, couldn't you?"

"Sure!" stated Ned.

"Well, then I'll depend on you. But I'm hoping I won't have to start out on the lake at night. It's bad enough in daylight—I never could learn to swim, somehow. But I'm glad it was nothing but George snoring. Now we'll go back down stairs and I'll finish telling you what I started on before we heard that noise."

Their footsteps echoed eerily through the night gloom of the old house as they descended. Reaching the kitchen, even though it was only illuminated by kerosene lamps, was somewhat of a relief to Bob Dexter and his chums. Though they were anxious to go over the ancient mansion at their leisure, in daylight, to see if it had any secrets.

"As I was saying," began Mr. Bardley, "when these men first came to Portchester in their red auto I was suspicious of 'em. And I had good reason to be. For—"

Suddenly the telephone bell rang, somewhat muffled in the pantry, and Ned's uncle gave almost as much of a nervous jump as he had when the moaning snores echoed.

"Want me to answer?" Ned offered.

"No. I'll go," and the old man, obviously nervous, spoke into the transmitter: "Hello! Oh, is that you, Jackson. What's that? They're at the old shack! I'll be right there!"

Banging the receiver back on the hook Mr. Bardley fairly sprang from the pantry crying:

"That gang is at the old shack! I've got to get there right away. You boys'll come with me, won't you?" he asked, as he made sure he had his automatic.

"Sure!" echoed Bob.

"Then you'd better arm yourselves." He pulled open the table drawer and this time each one of the three lads possessed himself of a weapon. "Now hurry!" he cried.

"But where is this shack—what is it?" demanded Bob.

"It's an old cabin standing on a hill back of the bank," was the answer. "Just on the edge of town. It won't take us long to get there."

"Not if we go in the flivver, Uncle Jason!" exclaimed Ned. "She's right in the barn—won't take a minute to get her going. We can make time in that."

"That's so—I never thought of your car," said the old man. "Make haste!" he begged.

"What about leaving the house alone?" asked Harry as the party ran toward the barn that served as a garage.

"'Twon't be alone with George up stairs," was the answer.

Bob and his chums thought George would be of little service, so soundly did he sleep. But there was no time to be lost and they were soon careening down the highway toward the town, a short distance away.

"Take that road," Mr. Bardley directed Ned, beside whom he sat, Ned being at the wheel. "It'll take us right back of the shack. It's an old place I own," he explained. "Nobody lives in it but these men in the red auto have been after me to sell it to 'em. I won't, and that's part of the trouble. So they're here, are they? Um!"

"Who gave you the warning?" asked Bob as the auto jolted over a rough road.

"Jackson. Night watchman at the bank," was the answer. "He saw 'em sneaking around and he telephoned me. I'd given him orders to do so."

The headlights of the flivver now picked out a small building standing on a hill at the foot of which ran the main street of Portchester and on which thoroughfare the bank was located. No sooner had the lights outlined the shack than Bob, pointing, cried:

"The red auto!"

"At 'em, boys!" cried Mr. Bardley. They all leaped from Ned's car and ran forward.

An instant later, two slivers of flame cut the darkness back of the red auto. There was a jingle of broken glass and the scene was shrouded in darkness as Ned cried:

"They shot out our headlights!"

CHAPTER VII

THE MIDNIGHT KNOCK

SUDDEN transition from the glaring illumination of the auto headlights into the blackness of night confused, for the moment, Bob Dexter and his friends. They could make out nothing following those two shots which demolished the lamps of the flivver.

"There they go!" cried Harry as the throbbing of a powerful motor came smashing through the stillness of the night. "They're going to run for it!"

"Without lights, too!" added Ned.

"Two can play at that game!" exclaimed Bob. "If your can can run, Ned, take after 'em!"

"In the dark?"

"It isn't any darker for us than it is for them. Besides, you have your parking lights, haven't you? Won't they do to show you the way?"

"Guess so! Never thought of 'em!" Ned answered.

He leaped back toward his car and got under the steering wheel. A touch of the starter button told him the motor was not damaged, and a second later he had switched on the two, small park-

ing lights. They but feebly illuminated the road that passed the old shack on the hill above the Portchester bank, but there was light enough to see to run by.

"They'll get away!" muttered Mr. Bardley who was following the boys into the flivver.

"Maybe not!" answered Bob. "We've got plenty of gas and Ned's car is speedy if she does rattle."

"You can't catch a flying auto and there's no use trying," declared the old man.

"Autos can't fly," Ned reminded his uncle. "And from the glimpse I had of this red one she didn't appear to have any balloon attachments."

"Well, how does it get from here to Clayville, the other side of the lake, in ten minutes?" demanded his uncle, and Bob had no answer ready.

By this time he had started to drive his light, but really fast, car down the slope, taking the direction in which the red auto seemed to have vanished. For with the two shots that smashed the headlights of the flivver, the mysterious car had quickly departed.

"Can you see them?" asked Harry who was in the rear seat with Mr. Bardley.

"Not yet," Ned answered. "Where does this road lead, Uncle Jason?" he asked, endeavoring, in the dim illumination of the parking lights, to keep from going into the ditches that lined either side of the dirt highway descending the hill on which stood the shack.

"Goes right past my bank and then into the lake road," was the answer. "Better stop at the bank as you pass it, Ned."

"What for?"

"Well, Jackson may have some other news for me. Anyhow, I don't believe it's safe to chase these scoundrels in the dark."

"It may be the best and only chance we'll get," decided Bob. "You want to catch these men, don't you, Mr. Bardley?"

"I did, yes."

"Then you don't *now?*" asked Bob, sharply.

"Well, I'm not *quite* so anxious since those shots they fired."

"They didn't fire at us," commented Bob. "Only at our lamps. That shows they're afraid—afraid of being followed and caught. If they were real scoundrels they would have fired at us. I'm sure we must have made pretty good targets, standing as we did, in the glare of the lights."

"Which we'll take care not to do again," spoke Ned as he guided the car around a curve in the hill road and safely brought it out on the main thoroughfare leading past the bank.

"It was rather foolish," Bob admitted. "But what do you say," he asked, "shall we keep on after them Mr. Bardley?"

"'Tisn't safe," was the answer. "Besides you'll never catch that flying, red auto."

"I'll give 'em a run for their money, anyhow!" declared Ned, stepping harder on the accelerator

which sent the flivver ahead with a jump. The going was better now, the road firmer, wider and with an occasional lamp.

As the flivver flashed past the bank the boys had a glimpse of a figure in the doorway. It was a man and he waved both arms frantically. He may have shouted but his voice was lost in the rattle of the flivver.

"That's Jackson!" cried Mr. Bardley. "We'd better see what he wants."

However Ned (and his chums were with him in this) wanted to see if he could not catch up to the mysterious red auto. So he crowded on full speed, whizzing down the main street of Portchester, quite deserted at this hour, though it wasn't late.

But when they turned into the river road and saw, on one long, straight stretch, no sign of the fleeing car, Bob remarked:

"We might as well give it up for a while. Let's go back to the bank and see what the watchman wanted. Besides, Ned, we have yet to hear your uncle's story as to what all this means."

"That's so. Up to now it's been a sort of wild goose chase. I guess we may as well give up."

He swung the car around and they were soon at the bank.

"What is it, Jackson?" asked Mr. Bardley of the night watchman.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" Jackson asked, seemingly

surprised to recognize the bank head with the three boys.

"Of course it's me!" said Mr. Bardley. "Didn't you telephone me that those men were up around the shack?"

"Yes, I did, and I was waiting for you to come here. I was out in front, waiting for you, and when I saw the flivver go past I thought maybe it was the police after robbers. I waved."

"We saw you," Mr. Bardley stated. "We'd already been up to the shack. Went there the first thing. They shot at us."

"I thought I heard shots," the watchman remarked. "Any of you hit?"

"No," Bob answered. "They only fired at our lights."

"Well, now tell me all about it, Jackson," admonished Mr. Bardley as he led the way into the dimly-lit bank, followed by the boys.

"Isn't an awful lot to tell," stated the watchman. "I've been on the lookout, not only here in the bank, but around in back, and looking up at the shack on the hill, like you told me. Been doing it for the last few nights, but I didn't see anything until tonight, a little while ago. Then I heard a car going up the hill. I went out and looked up. I saw the men get out. Then I 'phoned you."

"Yes. Glad you did. Is that all?"

"Yes, Mr. Bardley, that's all. Except for what happened to you. Did the men get away?"

"Yes. Shot out the big lights on Ned's car. We chased 'em but I saw you waving so I had him turn back."

"Did they try to rob the bank?" asked Bob, asking a question that had been in his mind for some time.

Mr. Bardley laughed. It sounded rather strangely in the dim silence of the deserted bank.

"Rob this place!" he chuckled. "They'd have a hard job at that. This may be a one-man, one horse, country bank, but it's got one of the most modern vaults you ever saw to protect our valuables. Come here—open up, Jackson," he ordered.

Under the guidance of the night watchman the boys looked at the vault its steel doors gleaming behind an outer grille-work of big steel bars. They heard the clicking of the clock of the time lock.

"I'd like to see 'em get in there!" chuckled Ned's uncle. "No, it isn't the bank they're after—it's me, I tell you!"

"What for?" asked Ned, and the same inquiry was in the minds of Bob and Harry.

"Tell you when we get back to my house," was the answer. "Well, there's nothing wrong here—knew there wouldn't be. But you did right to telephone me, Jackson. Keep your eyes open the rest of the night."

"Yes, Mr. Bardley. But I don't imagine they'll come back."

"I don't, myself, Jackson. Well, boys, if you're

ready we'll get back. Have those lamps mended, Ned and I'll pay the bill. 'Tisn't fair to have you boys helping me and not pay for it."

"Oh, that's all right, Uncle Jason."

"Well, send me the bill. And now for home. But be careful how you approach the house."

"Why?" asked Bob, struck by a note of fear in the old man's voice.

"Those fellows may be in hiding. Can't be too careful."

However a careful approach and an inspection all around the gloomy old mansion showed nothing untoward so they put the car back in the barn and went inside. The first sound they heard was the loud, weird snoring of George.

"Nothing seems to have disturbed him," remarked Mr. Bardley. "But it's best to make sure." They had entered by way of the kitchen and, stepping to a side wall the old man pressed an electric button that had, seemingly, been newly installed. A distant bell rang loudly. The snoring suddenly ceased and the Negro's voice called down:

"Who all's dere?"

"Is everything all right, George?" asked Mr. Bardley.

"Oh, yes, boss. Ain't nuffin done happen sence I went t' bed."

"That is as far as you know," remarked Ned's uncle in a low voice. "I guess," he went on, to the

boys, I'll have to get a bodyguard who isn't such a heavy sleeper."

"But why do you need a bodyguard, Uucle Jason?" asked Ned.

"Well, I'll tell you the story. It's getting long past my bedtime," he said, looking at the clock which indicated a quarter past 12. "But I'll make it short.

"You know, Ned," he began as they all sat down, I'm a rich man. Oh, I know I don't look it and I don't live like one because it suits me to live this way," he said as Bob and the others, involuntarily, glanced around the kitchen. "But I've worked hard, I've saved and I've made good investments and I'm worth quite a bit of money. I own most of the stock in the bank and that's a well-paying institution, too. So I'm pretty well fixed.

"Well, nothing out of the ordinary has happened to me all these years while I've been laying up money until a few weeks ago. Then, all of a sudden there appeared in Portchester this swift, red auto."

"What was there alarming in that?" asked Bob.

"Nothing, at first," went on Mr. Bardley. "Ours is a small town but we have our share of cars, sporty and flivvers. But the queer part about this car was that it would be seen here, say early in the evening, and then a little while later would

appear in Clayville, on the other side of the lake, a good forty miles away.

"At first I thought, as a lot of folks did, that there were two cars just alike, which wouldn't be impossible. But though there may be two cars alike, one seen here and the other in Clayville at about the same time, you can't make duplicates of four different men."

"It wouldn't be so easy," Bob admitted. "Were there four men in the red car running around here?"

"Four men, yes, and the kind of men I don't like—jail-birds if ever I've seen any!" declared the old man, vehemently. "It was knowledge that the red car with these four men in being seen here and, ten minutes later in Clayville, forty miles away, that made me suspicious soon as I heard it. How did they get to the other side of the lake?"

"Crossed in some sort of speedy boat," suggested Harry.

"There isn't any boat on this lake big enough to ferry that red car over," declared Mr. Bardley. "I admit if the auto could cross the lake it would explain how it could be seen here at one time and, ten minutes later, in Clayville. But it can't swim, that red auto can't, and there isn't a boat capable of taking it over. Besides, if they used a boat somebody would see 'em."

"Has no one seen them when they do their strange flying act?" Ned inquired.

"No one, that is, exactly," his uncle answered.

"I'm about the only one vitally interested and I haven't had the chance, even if I dared, to follow these men closely and see just how they get from one side of the lake to the other. All I've been able to do is to check them as having been in Portchester. Then, less than a quarter of an hour later, I'd get word from Murchison, in Clayville, that they were there.

"I tell you, boys, it's got me worried and I don't mind saying scared. That's why I sent for you, Ned, for I remembered you said you had a friend who did detective work. Now see if you can get at the bottom of this. What is the object of these four men in their red car that goes so fast—fairly flies I say, though of course I know it can't do that."

"Why not?" asked Bob, quietly.

"Why not what?"

"Why couldn't those men have some airplane or small dirigible that would pick up their car with cables and grappling hooks and ferry it over the lake by the air route? It's possible."

"Do you think it's probable?" asked Harry.

"Why not?" Bob countered.

"Well, for one thing, nobody has seen an airplane or a dirigible ferrying a red auto across the lake, has there?"

"No, not as I've heard of," answered Mr. Bardley.

"There!" and Harry grinned at Bob.

"Oh, I don't hold to that theory," said the

young detective. "I only mentioned it since we must not pass anything up in this investigation. But that would be one way of getting from here to Clayville in ten minutes."

"Only it wasn't done," spoke Ned.

"As far as we know," Bob corrected. "But what I can't understand Mr. Bardley," he went on, "is why you fear these men. You aren't afraid that they will rob your bank, you say. And just because they ride around town in a red auto, and appear, or seem to appear in two different places almost at the same time, doesn't seem to argue that they will harm you."

"I've got a better argument than that!" snapped the old man.

"What is it?"

"They've actually threatened me—more than once. I tell you they're after me and I'm afraid. I—"

The silence of the old house was broken by a midnight knock that sounded loudly on the distant front door. Mr. Bardley shrank down in his chair.

CHAPTER VIII

BOB IS MISSING

"RING! Ring the bell for George!" gasped the old man, pointing to the electric push button on the wall.

"What for?" asked Ned in a low voice. "Just because some one knocks—"

"But at the front door—and at midnight!" whispered his uncle. "They're after me—ring for George! He'll protect me! That's what I got him for!"

"The best thing George seems to do is to sleep," murmured Harry. "That and snore. Who is this knocking, anyhow?"

"That's what we've got to find out," Bob remarked. "But I don't see any necessity for getting George up. We're four and we've all got guns. And, speaking of guns, I wish we'd thought to have sent a bullet or two after those fellows in the red auto who shot at us."

"By golly! It's too bad we didn't!" exclaimed Ned. "But it's too late now! There he goes again!" he cried as, once more the knock sounded echoingly on the distant front door.

"I'm going to see who it is!" decided Bob. "Come on you fellows, back me up."

He held his flashlight in his left hand and the automatic in his right as he started into the dark hall toward the front door. Mr. Bardley was still slumped down in his chair but the two other boys, following Bob's lead, trailed after him.

Again the knock echoed, sounding louder now that the boys were close to the portal. Bob called, as he leveled his weapon at a panel about the height of a man's head:

"Who is it?"

"Is that you Mr. Bardley?" came the challenging answer in what, as far as the boys were concerned, seemed a friendly voice.

"No, but Mr. Bardley is here," Bob replied. "What is it—who are you?"

"I have a message for him," was the reply. "I'm his nearest neighbor, Si Waterby. Some one has been trying to get Mr. Bardley on the telephone but it's out of order so they rang me up. What's the matter with Mr. Bardley? Is he sick?"

"No, my uncle is all right," Ned answered. "But he didn't know who it was that knocked and—"

"Ye can't tell by th' sound of a knock who 'tis, mostly!" chuckled Mr. Waterby on the other side of the still closed door. "If ye'll let me in I'll let ye see me!"

"It's all right, boys. I know Si's voice," said

Mr. Bardley who had followed the trio into the hall. "Go 'round to the kitchen door, Si," he advised. "I got this one nailed shut."

"Nailed shet! 'Tarnation but that's mighty queer. Wa'al, I'll go 'round back. Ain't sick, be ye, Jason?"

"No, I'm all right. But there's been some queer doings and I'm not taking any chances. Go around to the kitchen."

They all went back there and presently was admitted a little, wizened, white-haired and white-whiskered man. He seemed like some withered old apple that had been preserved through several winters, but he was gay and cheerful in contrast to the evidently frightened Jason Bardley.

"Who is it, Si?" asked the banker as he admitted his neighbor.

"Wa'al, all I know is I was waked up from a sound sleep by my tellyfoam ringin,' Sometimes I wish I'd never had th' 'tarnation dingus put in! But it's a help, sometimes. Anyhow, some man named Murchison called me from Clayville. Said he'd been tryin' t' git hold of you but couldn't."

"No, we've been—out," announced Mr. Bardley with a hesitation that was marked.

"Twan't that which made it so this here Murchison couldn't git ye," went on Silas Waterby, with a little cackling laugh.

"What was it then?" demanded the old bank owner.

"Your tellyfoam don't work—out of order, so Murchison says th' central gal told him."

"Don't work!" gasped Mr. Bardley.

"No! So this here Murchison asted th' gal t' give him th' nearest foam t' you an', natcherally, that's me. So I gets runged up in th' middle of th' night t' take a message fer you, Jason. Not thet I mind, though, fer neighbors has got t' be neighbors, which is what I allers said an' allers will."

"What's the message?" asked Mr. Bardley as he slid over to the pantry containing the telephone.

"Mighty queer sort of message, ef ye ast me!" commented the little, wizened old man. "Near as I could git it, fer I was woke up out of a sound sleep, 'twas t' th' effect that th' red auto was in Clayville."

Mr. Bardley started and looked at the boys.

"What did I tell you?" he murmured. "It flies!"

"Wan't nothin' said t' me over th' tellyfoam 'bout no *flyin'* auto," commented Mr. Waterby. "All this here Murchison said was thet th' red car was in Clayville. Then he hung up an' I put on some clothes an' come over here. I didn't know ye kept th' front door locked, Jason."

"I have of late, yes. And I'm much obliged for your trouble. Was that all?"

"Thet's all—jest that th' red auto was seen. Mighty queer message t' come at midnight an'

wake a body out of a sound sleep ef ye ast me!"

"I'm sorry you were disturbed, Si," spoke Mr. Bardley. "But it was needful that I get this message, strange as it may seem. I'm obliged to you."

"Oh, don't mention it. Neighbors has got t' be neighbors, I allers said an' allers will. Anyhow, I ginnerally wake up along 'bout one o'clock t' git a drink of water an' it's 'bout thet now, I reckon. Wa'al, I'll be gittin' back. If your tellyfoam is busted, an' ye want t' use one in th' mornin' come over t' my place."

"I will, thank you. But I can't imagine my instrument being out of order," said Mr. Bardley.

However when he tried to raise the central office, after his neighbor's departure, there was not so much as a click in the instrument no matter how often he moved the receiver on its hook.

"What does that mean, boys?" he asked turning to Bob and his chums. There was a look of fear on his face.

"It means either that the telephone is out of order, which often happens," stated Bob, "or that the wires have been cut!"

"I might have known it!" exclaimed Ned's uncle. "The scoundrels are pressing me hard! I'll get George."

None of the boys opposed this, since it did seem a bit sinister that the telephone should go dead after the events of the evening. So the Negro was summoned and told to remain up and on guard the remainder of the night.

"I'll go to my tower," decided the old man. "They can't get me there. I'll lock myself in."

"And we'll be right below you, each one with a gun!" declared Ned, waving his.

"But, Mr. Bardley," spoke Bob, "you haven't yet told us why you fear these men. I admit the action of the red car is a bit odd, but I think that can be explained—I mean the seeming appearance of it in two remote places about the same time. But what have these men done to you?"

"Nothing—yet," was the answer. "But they have threatened me."

"In what way?"

"It's like this," went on Ned's uncle. "The story's simple enough. Shortly after these fellows in their flying red car, as I call it, came to Portchester, they came to see me at the bank. They got me alone in my private office and asked me to sell 'em the shack up on top of the hill."

"There wasn't much alarming in that, was there?" asked Bob.

"No, not until I refused to sell 'em the shack," was the answer. "Then they virtually threatened to get the property in spite of me and they said if I didn't sell or transfer it to them they'd find ways to make me."

"Can they?" asked Ned.

"I don't see how," his uncle replied. "It's my property, free and clear, and I've owned it a good while. I laughed at 'em. Then one of the men said to another something in a low voice, but all

I could hear was 'kidnap him,' and from then on I've been afraid. So many rich men have been spirited away that I'm worried. That's why I got word to your mother, Ned."

"Did you tell the police here?" asked Bob.

"No. What was the use? They don't know how to handle such cases. Besides, we haven't a police force in Portchester worth the name. I'd rather depend on you boys."

"But what happened after they asked you to sell them the shack, you refused and they virtually threatened to kidnap you?" asked Bob.

"Well, they went out of my office," said the banker, "and I could tell they were mad and desperate. Since then I've taken what precautions I could, especially as those men are still rushing about in that red car that's here one minute and the next across the lake, so to speak. Besides, you saw how desperate they were. Look what happened at the shack tonight—now my telephone wires are cut! I tell you, boys, I'm mighty afraid!"

"Did they say why they wanted this old shack, that doesn't appear to have any special value?" asked Harry.

"No, and that's another queer thing about it," answered Mr. Bardley. "Why should they want it? It's nothing but a sort of log cabin I took a notion to quite a few years ago and bought. Sometimes, when I want to be quiet and figure out some finance matters, I go there all by myself—

might stay a couple of nights. I can't see why they should want it."

"Does seem a bit odd," Bob admitted. "And they certainly took high-handed measures, demanding that a man sell property he doesn't want to part with. What sort of men were they?"

"Looked like foreigners to me—Italians I judged. There were four of 'em."

"The same four seen in the red auto?"

"Yes, the same four. They're ugly looking customers. And they virtually threatened me."

"Why didn't you have them arrested, Uncle Jason?" asked Ned. "The police force here could surely do that."

"I was so surprised that I didn't think of that. I let them get away. Since then that red car hasn't been in one place long enough for anybody to get close enough to it to arrest the men. It's on the jump all the while. I figured the best way was to protect myself.

"So I locked up the front part of my house, got George, bought a motor boat and I'm going to have a man to run it—Murchison can do that when he gets back—he's been working for me for some time—I can trust him. And then I sent for you boys. Take it all in all I think I'm better off than by notifying the police."

"Well, maybe you are," Ned admitted. "You haven't seen Bob in action yet."

"Oh, cut it out!" Bob admonished. "This may

be serious, fellows. I don't like the way those fellows behaved toward Mr. Bardley."

"I don't myself," said the banker. "You'd think, to hear them talk, that they had some hold over me."

"Have they?" asked Bob.

Mr. Bardley shot him a quick look and then slowly replied:

"Certainly not. I never saw the men before."

"And that's all you can tell us?" questioned Bob.

"That's all now—yes. And it's time we got to bed. In the morning I'll see about my telephone and get Murchison here. We may have to use that boat any hour. George, I'm depending on you."

"I'll be on de job, boss! Doan't worry! I'se gwine t' mek mahself some strong coffee so I won't fall asleep."

They left the Negro in the kitchen and went upstairs, Mr. Bardley to his cupola room, the boys selecting three adjoining chambers near an old-fashioned bath.

For some little time the chums talked among themselves after getting into their pajamas, going over the different aspects of the mystery. Then they went to their various beds.

Ned was the first of the trio to awaken in the morning. At least he thought he was the first for he called to Harry twice before getting a sleepy answer. Then Ned went to Bob's room and opened the door.

"Come on, Detective!" he called. "Time you were on the job!"

There was no reply and, opening wider the door, Ned saw that Bob was missing. His bed had been occupied but the young sleuth wasn't in it, nor were his clothes in evidence.

"I say, Harry, come here!" called Ned to his other chum.

"What's the row?"

"Bob is gone!"

CHAPTER IX

AN ANXIOUS SEARCH

"WHAT's the matter?" demanded Mr. Bardley, descending to the second floor from his quarters in the cupola. "Has anything happened? Have they come back—those men? I heard loud voices—"

"I was just calling Bob," Ned reported.

"What for?"

"Why, just to wake him up. It's getting late and I thought he might have overslept. He'd want to get to work early on this mystery, I thought. But—"

Ned paused to make a more thorough search of Bob's room, stepping in to open a closet which was empty, and then he hurried to the bath.

"Well!" snapped Mr. Bardley.

"Bob isn't here," went on Ned and there was alarm in his voice.

"Don't be silly!" exclaimed a voice farther down the hall and Harry came from his room.

"Silly!" repeated Ned. "What do you mean? I tell you—"

"You can tell me that Bob isn't in his room,"

broke in Harry, "and that's about all you can tell me. Don't be worried."

"Why, do you know where he is?" Ned demanded.

"No. But I can guess."

"Where?"

"Probably out around the house, looking for the cut telephone wire, maybe down at the boat house, trying to get a look at the trim little craft we glimpsed last night or maybe out trying to put new lamps in the flivver to replace those that were shot out."

"Well, I suppose I was a bit hasty to get excited when I found Bob wasn't in his room," admitted Ned with a laugh. "But after what you told us, Uncle Jason, and knowing those men were around I got sort of suspicious."

"Don't blame you," said the old man. "You don't have any certain knowledge, do you," he asked Harry, "that Bob is in any of the places you mentioned?"

"No certain knowledge, no. But we can soon find out."

"Sure! Let's!" agreed Ned. "I won't be easy until I see old Bob again. There's more back of this mystery than appears."

"You're right there, Ned," his uncle said. "I can't say that I rested easy last night, though nothing disturbed me after I got to bed. But we'll go down and see where Bob went. If he's out he must have passed through the kitchen and George

would have seen him. The front door is nailed shut."

The three, descending the stairs, found George in the kitchen starting to get breakfast. The Negro bodyguard and cook combined seemed bright and alert.

"Mornin', folks!" he greeted, pleasantly.

They responded and Mr. Bardley asked:

"Any disturbance in the night, George?"

"Not a thing, no sah, boss!"

"You kept awake, I suppose?"

"Shore did, boss. I had mah sleep out early in 'de evenin'. But ef I hadn't, dat strong coffee I took wouldn't 'a' let me close mah eyes ef I'd wanted t'."

"Then you must have seen Bob go out a while ago?" asked Ned.

"Says which, boss?" George seemed slightly puzzled.

"I say you must have seen my chum, Bob Dexter—the young detective you know—you must have seen him pass through the kitchen on his way out."

"No, sah, boss, I didn't."

"You didn't?"

"No. Ain't nobody done gone out ob dis house through th' kitchen sence yo' all done woke me up, Mistah Bardley an' told me t' stay on guard. An' dat's whut I done!"

"Do you mean to say," exclaimed Ned, "that

Bob hasn't gone out this way?" He pointed to the outer kitchen door.

"No, sah, he didn't done go out dat way! Why, de do' am locked just laik it was las' night. I ain't unlocked it yit!"

He proved it by turning the key also pointing to the bolt which was still on.

"This is funny!" remarked Ned.

"Maybe he went out some other way," suggested Harry.

"He couldn't go any way but this," declared Mr. Bardley. "The front door is nailed."

"How about going down cellar and out that way?" asked Ned.

"The outer cellar door is also nailed," his uncle replied.

"Are there windows?"

"Yes, but they are barred. Of course a bar could be forced but I don't see why Bob should go to that length. He must be in the house. We'll have a look."

"How about the side door?" Ned wanted to know. "I seem to remember a side door, Uncle Jason."

"There is one, Ned, but that is also nailed shut. Boys, since these men virtually threatened to kidnap me the only way to get into or out of this house, without a lot of breaking, is to come in through the kitchen door when it's unlocked and unbolted. So unless Bob went out this way he didn't go out."

"He didn't!" declared George, positively.

"I don't see how he could and have locked the door and bolted it on the inside," Harry remarked. "He must be around inside, somewhere. You didn't look carefully, Ned."

"I looked in his room, I'll guarantee that. But of course there are plenty of other places in this old house."

"Yes, there are," Mr. Bardley admitted, in answer to a look from his nephew. "But it will be easy to establish whether or not Bob is inside. It will take a little time to go through all the old rooms and passages—there are a number of them. But I suggest if we call he will answer—if he's here," he added with significant emphasis.

"Where else could he be?" Ned demanded.

"I don't know," his uncle replied. "But let's first establish as well as we can, the fact that he is or isn't here. Scatter and call. He would have no object in hiding from us."

"No, he wouldn't," Harry agreed.

"Bob wouldn't be playing tricks at a time like this," added Ned.

They called Bob Dexter's name through the echoing, rambling, gloomy old house but there was no answer. Search in the cellar and various rooms gave no clue.

"I'm going to have a look outside!" declared Ned.

He hurried to the kitchen and opened the door. His uncle and chum followed and George stood

in the doorway a worried look on his shining, black face.

"Look!" exclaimed Ned, pointing to the telephone wire. "It was cut all right!"

They saw the copper strands, cleanly severed with nippers.

"They didn't get the one from my cupola to the boat house!" said Mr. Bardley, indicating the higher conductor.

"It's only a private, local 'phone—they would have no object in cutting that," Harry said.

Ned broke into a run.

"Where are you goin'?" asked his uncle.

"Down to the boat house. Come on!"

They followed hastily.

CHAPTER X

AROUND THE LAKE

BEFORE the two boys and Mr. Bardley reached the boat house out on the end of the dock that extended into Lake Winabog, they heard sounds which brought expressions of relief to the faces of Ned and Harry.

"There he is!" Ned exclaimed.

"In the boat house!" added Harry. "Sure enough!"

"Someone's there, that's sure," agreed Mr. Bardley. "But whether it's Bob—"

They could all hear hammering and banging noises which, undoubtedly, came from the small building. Hastening their speed, the trio ran along the dock. They could see that the main doors at the water end of the shelter were swung open.

"He's going to take out the boat!" exclaimed Harry.

"He must have found out something or be on the trail of some one," added Ned. "Though how he got out of the house through locked and nailed doors is more than I can figure."

"Just one of Bob's tricks," chuckled Harry.

Mr. Bardley and the boys could now look into

the interior of the boat house. They saw the trim, speedy little craft floating in the small lagoon formed by the piling and boarded sides of the dock and house. In the boat, bending over the motor and doing something to it with a hammer or wrench, was a figure.

"Hello, Bob!" called Harry.

"What's the idea, getting up before breakfast?" demanded Ned.

The figure in the boat looked up. It wasn't Bob Dexter. It was a man whom neither Ned nor Harry remembered to have seen before. They gasped in surprise and disappointment as Mr. Bardley exclaimed:

"Murchison!"

"Yes, Mr. Bardley," answered the man who had the look and actions of a mechanic. "I thought, after what happened last night, I'd better come over here and get this boat ready for you. You got my message, didn't you?"

"About the red auto being seen again in Clayville?"

"That's what I mean. I saw it and went to 'phone you as you told me to, but your line was out of order."

"It wasn't out of order," Mr. Bardley retorted. "It was cut."

"Cut?" cried Murchison standing up in the forward engine compartment, the hinged hooded cover of which he had raised to permit him to work. "Cut, eh?"

"Clean!" declared the banker. "The men were out at the shack, but they got away." Briefly he related the happenings of the night.

"Well, then I guess it's a good thing I decided to come back here and not stay in Clayville," suggested Murchison.

"I'm glad you did," went on Mr. Bardley. "They're getting ready to close in, Murchison."

"Well, we'll be ready for 'em," said the mechanic, grimly. The boys saw a heavy revolver in a holster at his side. He tapped the small but powerful motor significantly as he went on: "She'll soon be in good shape. I thought we'd better give her a try-out so if we had to use her in a hurry we could."

"Can we come?" burst out Harry, forgetting for the moment, as Ned had, also, the fact that they had not found Bob in the boat house as they hoped to.

"Friends of yours?" asked Murchison of Mr. Bardley, looking at Ned and Harry sharply.

"Yes. This one is my nephew. The other is his chum, and there's a third lad—the detective—but he seems to be missing."

"Detective! Missing!" murmured Murchison. "That sounds sort of queer."

"There's a lot more queer than that," said the banker with what sounded like a worried sigh. "This whole business is more than queer and I don't know what to think. You didn't see anything of him, did you, Murchison?"

"Who?"

"Bob Dexter, the young detective who came here, with Ned and Harry, to try and get at the bottom of this red auto mystery. Did you see him?"

"How would I see him, Mr. Bardley? I don't even know him."

"That's so. You've never seen him. I forgot."

Harry and Ned looked more closely at the man they had heard the banker mention as his helper and one on whom he relied to report the presence of the red auto in Clayville across the lake. They did not like the appearance of the man. Ned said, later, in private to Harry, that he thought Murchison had a sneaking look.

"He sure has!" Harry agreed.

But now the two chums were anxious to get some news of Bob. And when Murchison declared he had not seen him, nor had observed anything unusual in coming, early that morning, to Portchester from Clayville, they were again at a loss to account for Bob's disappearance.

Murchison related that, after trying in vain to get Mr. Bardley on the latter's telephone, he had raised Mr. Waterby and sent the message by him.

"Then," resumed the mechanic, "I figured I'd better come here and get the motor boat in shape for a quick run if we had to make it. You told me not to come back from Clayville until you gave the word, Mr. Bardley, but I figured that if you

didn't want me here at this time you could send me back."

"I do want you here, Murchison. I think you can be of more help to me here than you can in Clayville, though you may have to go back there. When did you leave?"

"Soon after I telephoned Waterby. I started to row across but I lost an oar and then I hailed a motor boat. But the fellow in it had to go up to pretty near the end of the lake on business and so it took me most of the night to reach here. I arrived just about sun-up and I didn't want to rouse you so I came here—I had a key you know—and started to get the motor tuned up. She's about ready for a trial spin now."

"We'll take one," decided Mr. Bardley. "But first we'll have breakfast."

"What about finding Bob?" asked Ned.

"We'll look for him," his uncle promised.

"But where shall we look?" asked Harry.

"Around the lake," decided Mr. Bardley.

"We'll make a circuit of it and look for that boy."

"But why would he be out on the lake?" asked Harry. "What I think is that those men came and got him in the night."

"How could they?" challenged Ned. "There wasn't any disturbance in or around the house. Bob wasn't kidnapped if that's what you're thinking of."

"Then what happened to him?" Harry demanded

"I admit it's queer," spoke Ned. "But I think Bob went off on his own hook to look up some end of this mystery. He'll come back in his own good time and tell us."

"How'd he get out of the house through locked and nailed doors?" was Harry's next question.

Ned could not answer this and Mr. Bardley shook his head.

"There's queer doings," he muttered.

Reasons for Bob's strange disappearance and the sinister actions of the men in the red auto were in no way settled by the discussion at the breakfast table. Then, considerably worried but somewhat thrilled by the prospect of a boat trip, Ned and Harry got into the *Sunfish*, as the craft was named, and, with Murchison at the wheel, the party set off for a trip around the lake. Eagerly they scanned the coves and bays for a sight of Bob Dexter or the men in the red auto.

CHAPTER XI

THE LOCKED DOOR

BOB DEXTER was dangling on the end of a rope. This sounds like a very serious situation until it is explained that the young detective was easing himself down the aforesaid rope out of his bedroom window of the old Bardley house, shortly before dawn began to redden the eastern sky.

"Guess I'll have to drop the rest of the way," Bob murmured. "But the ground's soft and it's the only thing to do to get away so they won't guess how. I should have had a little longer rope."

What had happened was this. To Ned, Harry and Mr. Bardley it was a strange part of the red auto mystery. But to Bob Dexter it was the most natural thing in the world to do.

On going to bed that first night of the eventful first day spent in Portchester, Bob had decided that he wanted a first-hand and unhampered view of the old shack.

"I'd like to look around it myself, all alone, and without them knowing I have been there," Bob decided.

Having reached this point he began to consider ways and means of accomplishing his object. His

first care was to get out of the old house without letting his chums or Ned's uncle know about it.

"And that goes for George, too," mused Bob.

He realized that his only egress was by way of the kitchen door, but as this was locked and as George was on guard down there, it was going to be difficult to pass that ebony sentry.

"The only other way is out of my bedroom window," reasoned Bob. "For that I'll need a rope. I might tie the bed sheets together but that sort of a cable is always uncertain and I don't believe it will be long enough. Besides it will be clumsy."

During the talk after the return from the exciting trip to the old shack back of the bank, Bob had managed to slip away and wander about the old house. He was lucky enough to find a small but strong rope and this he concealed in his room. He decided to get up just before dawn, lower himself out of the window and make an inspection of the old shack.

"I can be back in time for breakfast, and maybe they won't even miss me," mused the young sleuth.

Bob's plan was well carried out. Arising and dressing he looped the rope around the leg of his bed which was close to the window. Then on this double cable, which was like a long letter U with the closed part around the bed-leg and the two ends dangling out of the window, Bob let himself down hand over hand.

"But the rope's a bit short," he decided when,

in the dim darkness preceeding the dawn, he looked down and found himself a few feet from the ground. "However I'm going to drop and chance it."

This he did, retaining hold of one end of the rope U. His fall jarred him a little but did no farther harm. He soon recovered and, by pulling on the length of rope he held he was able to haul the whole piece from around the bed-leg and down out through the open window which had no screen in it.

"There isn't a trace to show how I got out," Bob reasoned as he hid the rope under a clump of bushes. "And now for the old shack!"

He looked up at the dark and silent house. Not a sound came from it. There was no light in either of the windows of the rooms where Ned and Harry were sleeping. There was no light in the cupola where Mr. Bardley had hidden himself from the men he considered so daring and desperate. In the kitchen a faint glow showed and peering through a half-shaded window Bob saw the Negro, George, sitting in a chair eating a sandwich and drinking coffee.

"He's taking it easy," Bob mused. "And now I'm going to work."

He made his way out toward the highway that led to the old shack which he and his chums had visited earlier in the night. He took care to make as little noise as possible while near the house, as he did not want to alarm the sleepers. There was

no particular reason why Bob should not have let his friends know what he had in mind. But it suited him to work thus in secret. There came a time, though, when he wished he had not done it.

"Now I can step along a little bit more lively," Bob told himself as he got into the road. Foot-falls there would not echo back to the silent house.

From one point in the road, Bob had a glimpse of Lake Winabog. He looked out over the water and heard the distant chug of a motor boat. Had he known it, this was the boat bearing Murchison to the Bardley dock. But of course Bob did not know.

"Mighty pretty lake," mused Bob in a low voice, noting how the water sparkled in the rays of the moon, now almost below the tree tops. "I'll be glad to get out on it in a boat and do some fishing. But first I'm going to find out, if I can, why those men want Mr. Bardley to let them have the old shack. Also why they're trying to terrorize him. Though, for that matter, I guess it's more than just *trying*. They've done it, already. And then I want to find out about that red auto. It sure is queer how it can be in two place almost at the same time. Something queer about that."

Thus musing, Bob tramped on. It was dark and quiet. He reached the edge of the village which now lay below him in silent slumber, for he was on the inclined road that led up the hill to the shack back of the bank. It was the same road

whereon, a few hours before, Bob had been riding in the flivver with his chums.

Pausing for a moment before taking the last few steps of his strange journey, Bob looked at the silent, little town. As far as he could tell no one was stirring in it.

"The red auto bunch seem to have departed for the time being," he murmured.

He was now ascending the last slope that led up to the shack, a glimpse of which he had through the trees. Down below was the bank, and as Bob remembered the shiny, modern vault, guarding, it might be, considerable wealth, he thought of Jackson, the night-watchman and the warning he had telephoned.

"I had an idea, at first," mused Bob, "that the red auto bunch might have designs on the bank. But since seeing that vault I don't believe it's possible to crack it. There's something I haven't got to the bottom of yet. But I will!"

Giving a final look at the bank, before passing behind a rise in the ground which hid it from sight, and noting the gleaming light that showed through the back windows, Bob passed on to the shack.

He approached it cautiously for, though he did not believe it housed anyone now, or that the red auto men would return after their shooting, he was taking no chances. All was dark and silent around the old cabin.

Bob made a complete circuit of it, however, and then cautiously tried the door. As he expected,

he found it locked but he had come prepared and with one of several skeleton keys he carried he soon shot back the bolt of the lock.

The door squeaked on rusty hinges as it swung open.

"Good as an alarm clock!" chuckled Bob. "No need to announce myself."

He paused on the threshold, waiting to see if anything developed from the rusty-hinge alarm, but the interior of the shack was dark and silent.

Suddenly a sliver of light cut the gloom. Bob had switched on his little pocket torch and now flashed it about the place. He saw that it consisted of three rooms, two across the front and one, evidently a sort of a kitchen, in the rear.

"Nothing here," mused Bob as his light revealed the various nooks and corners of the two front rooms. "Not very well furnished, either. There's a cot and I suppose Mr. Bardley stretches off there when he come here to stay over night, like he said. Queer thing to do, if you ask me. But then I'm not supposed to have any opinion about that. I'll see what's back in the other room—kitchen, I guess. Though that would be more in Harry's line than mine. It's queer how that bird likes to eat!" he chuckled as he remembered his chum's failing and especially his delight in chicken livers.

Throwing the gleam of his light ahead of him, Bob proceeded to the rear room. It was, as he had

surmised, fitted up as a kitchen, with a coal range, some cooking utensils and dishes.

"Here's where Nat's uncle keeps bachelor's hall," mused the boy. "Lonesome sort of life he leads. No wonder he's gloomy and worried, though I can't say that the red auto men are the kinds to make a man feel easy. I've got to find out what their game is!"

Bob saw an open door that led into a sort of a pantry and he had a glimpse of canned food. Then he saw another closed door on the west side of the kitchen, the side nearest the bank, the roof of which was about on a level with the foundation of the old shack.

"Might as well see what's in there," mused Bob. He noted that the door closed with a spring-lock and catch on the outside. It was a strong fixture, much stronger than seemed necessary for the kind of place it was. Bob opened the door and stepped into what seemed like a large pantry. His light showed nothing but the walls, ceiling and floor, and he was wondering why such a bare room needed to be protected with such a heavy lock when, suddenly, the door was closed behind him with a loud slam. Bob started as he heard the lock snap shut and as he sprang against the portal, and tried in vain to push it open, he exclaimed:

"I'm caught! Locked in!"

CHAPTER XII

THE ALARM CLOCK

"MIGHTY nice little boat," remarked Ned as, sitting with Harry in the stern of the *Sunfish*, he watched the varying shores of the lake approach and recede as the craft made the circuit of Winabog.

"Wouldn't mind owning her," agreed Harry. "Think we'll get a chance to take her out ourselves, Ned?"

"We might, after this fracas is over. I'll ask my uncle about it," Ned promised.

The two chums conversed in low tones while Mr. Bardley, seated farther forward, talked quietly with Murchison who was steering. They had been out about a quarter of an hour and had covered about three miles of the lake's much-indented shore line.

The *Sunfish* was a small cabin motor craft, the engine being in a compartment forward, covered with a deck made in two parts to fold back, on hinges, like the hood of an auto.

Amidships came the enclosed cabin, which had folding bunks for four persons and a small galley and pantry, the cooking being done on a gasoline

stove. The rear of the cabin was a bulkhead and aft of that was an open cockpit, with a canvas covering where, in fair weather, guests could sit in chairs or along amidship lockers, and the steering could be done from a wheel on the port side of the bulkhead. In stormy weather the wheel could be shifted into the cabin.

"I sure would like to take this boat and cruise around the lake," went on Harry.

"Well, we're cruising now, aren't we?" asked Ned.

"Yes, but it's no fun when we're worrying about Bob."

"That's so. Sure is no fun without Bob. I can't imagine where he went."

"Or who took him," supplemented Harry.

"I don't lean to that theory at all!" declared Ned. "Bob isn't the kind to let himself be kidnapped without raising a row, and we didn't hear any."

"Perhaps they got to him before he had a chance to make a row."

"But look here!" argued Ned. "If any of those men had gotten into the house after Bob, which they have no reason to do, how do you account for them getting out with him, when all the doors were either locked or nailed from the inside? Or, for that matter, how do you account for them getting in—with George on guard?"

"I can't account for it," Harry was forced to admit. "All I know is that Bob's gone."

"And we've got to find him!" added his chum.

Mr. Bardley, who had been earnestly conversing with Murchison, now came back to where the boys sat close to the stern.

"Well," he said, "we haven't seen anything of him yet."

"No, Uncle Jason," his nephew agreed. "And it looks sort of queer. What do you think?"

"I think those men are at the bottom of it."

"But what would be their object in enticing Bob away? For if they have him they must have gotten him out of your house by asking him. He wouldn't have gone under force without making a row. So the only way I can account for it is that they must have gotten into communication with him after we went to bed and he went out voluntarily."

"Would he do that without speaking to us?" asked Harry.

"He might if there was some hurry about it—no time to notify us."

"That doesn't sound plausible," Harry objected. "We were right next to him in our rooms. Besides, what could those men want of him in a hurry?"

"Maybe he saw them from his bedroom window, without them seeing him," Ned suggested, "and he followed them."

"But how did he get out of his window?" asked Harry. "There's no sign of a rope or ladder and he didn't tear up his sheets and use 'em as I've

read of prisoners doing. The sheets are still on his bed, or they were when we left after breakfast. The more we talk about it and speculate on theories the worse ballled up we are."

"You're right there," Ned agreed. "All I'm sure of is that Bob went out of his own volition, though how he managed to do it is still as much a mystery as is the red auto. And, going a bit farther, I don't see what we are going to accomplish by going around the lake in this boat. Not but what it's fun!" he added, bearing in mind that he hoped to get permission from his uncle to run the boat with his chums.

"I just thought," remarked Mr. Bardley, "that Bob might have come down to the lake and found some sort of a boat to cruise around in. I mean a row boat. He might have hoped to get on some trail of the mystery. And being out thus, alone, something might have happened to him. He may have had an accident or those men may have intercepted him."

"Bob wouldn't have an accident in a row boat," Ned objected.

"He knows too much about 'em," added Harry.

"Well, there is always those men to reckon with," went on the old, eccentric banker. "Anyhow it will do no harm to cruise about a while longer to see if we can pick up any trace of him? Besides, I want to see how this boat runs. It's my first trip in her."

"She's a pippin!" declared Ned.

"A peach!" was Harry's opinion.

"A very good boat!" came from Murchison. "She's a bit stiff yet, but that will wear away. She'll be quite fast, too, when she gets broken in."

They cruised around for half an hour longer, meanwhile seeing nothing of Bob. They did speed up to, or hail, several rowing craft containing one or more persons, but on close inspection none of these occupants proved to be Bob. In the main they were fishermen.

Ned was about to propose that they turn around and go back to the house, thinking perhaps Bob might, by this time, have returned, when Harry suddenly pointed to a distant small spit of land jutting out into the lake.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "Isn't that the red auto?"

"It's a red auto right enough!" agreed Ned. "I can see it quite plainly."

There was no doubt but that the distant car was an auto bright red in color. About it were grouped several dark figures and, now and then, some of these could be seen to be violently moving about the brilliant-hued machine.

"Looks as if they were up to something, doesn't it?" exclaimed Harry.

"Sure does!" agreed his chum. "Maybe they've got Bob there on that spit."

"Speed up!" commanded Mr. Bardley, and Murchison opened wider the throttle of the motor. The *Sunfish* cleaved the water more power-

fully and they seemed to be leaping toward the little peninsula.

The nearer they approached it the more plain became the details of the red auto. And the figures could be seen to be hastening to and fro around it. Ned and Harry were sure that Bob had been caught and was being subjected to indignities on the part of the mysterious men when Murchison suddenly cut off the power, making the boat slow up.

"What's the idea?" asked Ned.

"Aren't we going to rescue Bob?" demanded Harry.

"Your chum isn't there," was the calm answer. "That is unless he's one of the Rayville fire department."

"Rayville fire department!" exclaimed Harry. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," answered Murchison, "that I see what that red machine is, now. It's a new motor pumper that the village of Rayville, opposite which we are now, just purchased. I remember reading about it. They brought it out on this spit to test it where they'd have plenty of water. Look, there goes the stream!"

As he spoke a column of water, evidently from a hose nozzle, shot high into the air and sprayed out in a feather-like effect as the wind caught it. Now that they were nearer the boys could see that the explanation was correct.

"A fire engine!" murmured Harry.

"It sure is a bright red," added Ned.

"Yes, it did look like the red auto we have such reason to fear," said Mr. Bardley. "Or at least that I fear."

"Now don't be getting that on your mind again," advised Murchison. "You may be all wrong about these men."

"Not much!" snapped Mr. Bardley. "They're after me for no good purpose. Why else would they try to force me to sell my shack on the hill?"

"Well, that's something I don't know," the mechanic answered. "But I think you're attaching too much importance to those men."

"Never, Sam!" was Ned's uncle's reply. "They're kidnappers, or at least they want to be, I'm sure."

"Do you think they kidnapped Bob?" asked Ned.

"Hard to say," his relative replied. "But they're after me."

They motored past the end of the spit and watched, for a little while, the volunteer firemen testing their new apparatus. Then as they drifted into a large cove Harry said:

"I don't believe there's much use going on any farther."

"Why not?" asked Mr. Bardley.

"Because," was the answer, "we can't stay out much longer without something to eat and we didn't bring anything, did we?"

"Might have expected that from him," chuckled Ned.

"No," admitted Mr. Bardley, "we didn't bring any food. We came off in too much of a hurry. Though we could stock up and stay out for a week, if necessary. I had the boat made with that in view."

"Then let's do that," Harry proposed. "I mean let's go back to the dock and stock up and then come out to look for Bob if he isn't back at the house when we get there. He may be there. If he isn't after we stock up, we'll cruise about until we find him."

"Not bad advice," agreed Murchison. "Shall I turn, Mr. Bardley?"

"Might as well, Jim."

The shot across to the other side of the lake, to give the boat a test and then the *Sunfish* was headed for the Portchester dock.

"No sign of him here," remarked Harry as they made fast.

"Not here, but the house is the more likely place," added Ned. "Come on—let's hurry."

It was past noon when they entered the old building where George was presiding in the kitchen, getting the noon meal ready.

"I done jes' 'bout gib you all up," he said, grinning. "Thought mebby yo' all was fixin' t' stay out 'till night."

"Harry's stomach wouldn't let us," chuckled Ned. "But have you seen or heard anything about Bob?"

"No, sah, I hasn't!" the Negro answered.

At that moment the alarm clock on the kitchen mantle rang loudly. It startled them all for the moment and, thinking it was the telephone, Mr. Bardley made a jump for the pantry, forgetting that the wires were still cut. Then he realized whence came the tinkle.

"Queer time for the clock to go off," remarked Ned.

Harry made a jump across the room and picked up a paper that seemed to have been rattled out of the clock by the vibration of the alarm. Harry took one look at the slip and cried:

"It's a warning! Look!"

CHAPTER XIII

NEAR DEATH

BOB DEXTER's first, and most natural, impulse, after finding that the closet door was closed and locked against him, was to make another attempt to open it.

"Guess I didn't push hard enough at first," he reasoned. "I hope I can force that spring-lock, though, from the look I had of it, the dingus seems pretty strong."

He paused for a moment to consider his position. It was far from being pleasant but he was not in the least alarmed. He had come alone to the old shack which the strange men in the red auto seemed so anxious to acquire from Ned's uncle. But being alone did not alarm Bob. He had planned it that way.

"I wonder," he mused after his first, impulsive pressure against the locked door, "I wonder if anybody shut me in here or if it was the wind that blew the door closed?"

It would seem to be necessary to discover this before he tried to get out. If the men of the mysterious car, or some of their gang, had sneaked softly into the shack after Bob and, seeing him

enter the closet, had made him a prisoner there, it might be wise to postpone his attempt to release himself until they had gone, or until he had learned something of their plans.

"I didn't hear a sound," mused Bob as he stood in the deep, velvety blackness of the little room. "If they closed in on me and got near enough to slam that door shut as soon as I was in the closet, they must have walked like cats. No, I didn't hear a sound."

He tuned his ears to catch any faint noise or echo in the rooms of the shack that lay beyond his prison, but could hear nothing. It was very silent in the old shack—a sinister silence.

"No, I don't believe I was followed—at least not yet," mused Bob. This last observation might indicate that he expected to be followed later, as, indeed, he did, unless he could release himself or be released. "It must have been the wind. Well, now that's off my mind the next thing is to figure how to get out of here."

He had his flashlight with him. Indeed he never went on a detective trip without it. The gleam from the small electric torch, as he flashed the beam about the room, showed him no more than he had seen at first. He was in a small room, the walls, ceiling and floor of which consisted of smooth, matched boards. It was very much like the cedar closets in some homes, only the wood was not of cedar, being, as Bob guessed, pine.

"If it's a closet, and that's what it seems to have

been built for," mused Bob, "it's mighty well made. But why didn't they put in some shelves or hooks or something, if it's for a closet? Looks more like a jail cell, or it would if it was stone or steel."

Having satisfied himself about the interior construction of his prison cell, Bob next turned his attention to the door. It was as smooth inside as were the walls or ceiling. There was no indication of the lock outside—no keyhole, no knob to push back the spring catch—nothing by which the outside mechanism could be operated from within.

"Looks as if Ned's uncle made this, or had it made, to keep prisoners in," thought Bob and he almost chuckled aloud in the darkness. "Or he might have made it for a storeroom for valuable papers and books. Only why didn't he put in shelves or boxes? It's very queer."

But Bob decided that speculation as to the uses to which the little room might be put could be left for a time.

"I've got to get out of here," he reasoned. "And the only way is to push back that spring catch, or bolt, from outside."

The only way to do this was to reach his hand through a hole in the door. Simple enough it would have been had there existed a hole. But there was none. The door was solid.

"Well, since there isn't a hole I must make one," decided Bob. "It oughtn't to take long to cut through one of the panels with my knife. If I

know anything about doors, the panels are always the thinnest parts. It won't take long to hack a hole through the panel nearest the catch."

Mentally he located, on the inside of the door, the best place to start cutting. Then he reached his hand into his trouser pocket for the knife. His fingers closed on some odds and ends—but not on the knife.

"That's queer," Bob mused. "I always keep it in that pocket, and I remember I had it the last thing on going to bed. I cut a broken fingernail with it." This minor surgical operation recurred to him distinctly.

"Let me see," he reasoned. "After I cut my nail did I put the knife back in my pocket or leave it on the bureau?"

Bob's detective abilities included a good memory and a reasoning mind and he brought these into play now with the result that he was able to assure himself that he had replaced the knife in his pocket.

"But it isn't there," he told himself. "Must have gotten a bit absent minded and slipped it into some other pocket."

A hasty search, however, all through his garments brought no knife to light and then like a gleam from his own flashlight it came into his mind what had happened.

"When I dropped off the end of that rope from my window," Bob reasoned, "the knife was jarred

out of my pocket. It's probably on the ground there now."

The loss of this much-needed implement was a sore one. Bob realized that without it he could do little toward his own release. Another hasty search through his pockets revealed nothing in the way of a sharp or edged tool that could be used to cut a hole in the door.

"Not even a nail-file," muttered the lad. "I use my knife for that. After this I guess I'd better carry two knives. Well, what next?"

Bob paused in the darkness to consider: He was in the dark as he had shut off his flashlight to save the battery. He did not know how long he would be imprisoned. If matters went as he had calculated he believed that, after a certain time, he would be released. He could approximate the hour—if nothing happened.

"But it won't do to take chances," he reasoned. "The clock may not go off, though I tested it. They may not come. So I had better do what I can to get out by myself."

Searching in his pockets for the missing knife had necessitated no light—he could feel around as well in the dark as in illumination. But now that he reasoned. "It might put the light on the blink,

Well, he must try some other way of escape.

"If I had one of the big flashlights I might use it as a hammer to knock out a panel of the door,"

he had no means of cutting the door—

though. But as I have only this small torch it

won't do to take chances breaking that against the door. I don't want to be left in the dark."

The next and most natural means of getting out of his prison was to attack the door with his feet. He believed he could kick out one of the lower panels and thus make a hole by which he could reach out and up to slip back the spring catch.

"It's the only way," Bob reasoned. "I'll do it!"

He raised his foot and delivered a smashing kick at the door. The echoing sounds of the blow died away and Bob switched on his light again (for he had kicked in the dark) to see how far he had progressed toward freedom, when he was aware of another sound in the shack.

Sounds, rather, would be a better description, for as he paused, after the delivery of his kick, he heard footsteps approaching and the murmur of voices. He heard a man's tones in the inquiry:

"What was that?"

"What was what?" another asked.

"That banging noise."

"I didn't hear any banging noise. There's no one here. Old man Bardley won't come back in a hurry after the reception we gave him last night!" chuckled the second speaker.

"It wouldn't have to be him," went on the other voice.

"Who else would it be?"

"Might be some of those boys."

"Oh, those fresh guys! I guess I scared them too!" and the voice ended in a chuckle.

"Well, maybe. But a guy can always come back."

"Not always!"

There was silence for a moment and Bob murmured:

"Here's one who came but can't get back."

He listened intently. The footsteps seemed to die away as did the voices. Then he heard them again. Clearly they were the men from the red auto meeting in the old shack.

But why? What for? What did they want? Why were they so eager to buy the place Ned's uncle would not sell?

Bob struggled to find answers to these questions.

Then, suddenly, he heard a voice say:

"We've got to do something and quick. Once we get him out of the way we can come here and—"

A door shut and cut off the voice. Evidently the men were in one of the front rooms. Bob strained his ears but could hear nothing save a distant mumble of voices.

Then, suddenly, it came to him that his position was more perilous than he had thought. Not so much from the men—for, evidently, they had no suspicion that he was locked in. But from the lack of air in his prison. The door closed more tightly than Bob had noticed. There was no win-

dow or other opening in the closet. The young detective had been quite active, trying to kick a hole in the door. He had winded himself and was breathing hard for a time.

He noticed that the air was not as fresh as it had been. His head began to ache. He had used up much of the life-giving oxygen and had replaced it with the poisonous exhalations of his own breath.

"Geel! It's stuffy in here!" gasped Bob.

Instinct told him to get down on the floor as the bad air, being lighter, would rise leaving the least contaminated on a strata near the ground.

For a time this gave him a little relief. But soon the stuffy feeling returned as did the ache in his head. He shut off his flashlight and lay down with his face close to the bottom of the door. He wanted to be in the dark so he might see how much of a crack there was beneath the portal to admit light. If light came in, so, also, would air.

But the bottom of the door was dark. He saw no streak of light. Nor could he breathe any fresh air that way.

"Tight as a drum!" gasped Bob. "I wonder how long I can live here, breathing up all the oxygen? Not long, I'm afraid. And if the clock doesn't go off—I shouldn't have taken this chance. I—I——"

The young detective found his thoughts trailing off into nothingness. His head ached more sharply. He could breathe only with difficulty.

Bob Dexter was near to death.

CHAPTER XIV.

TO THE RESCUE

ECHOING ghostily in the strange house was the tinkle of the bell on the alarm clock when Harry Pierce picked up that scrap of paper from the floor and uttered his surprised exclamation.

"What did you say it was?" demanded Ned.

"A warning!" Harry repeated.

"From whom?"

"Bob, it seems. Anyhow it's signed with his name."

Harry held out the paper but for a few seconds Ned did not offer to take it from his chum's fingers. Mr. Bradley murmured:

"Be careful, boys. It may be a trap!"

"Let's see just what happened," suggested Ned while the old man gave peremptory orders to George to make sure no one was approaching to the attack. The Negro, from his vantage point in the kitchen, reported that no one was coming.

"I don't know what happened," Harry said, "except what you know as well as I do—the alarm clock just went off and this paper dropped from it." He still held out the missive so curiously delivered.

"Then it was the alarm clock and not the telephone," whispered Ned's uncle.

"The clock—yes," Harry repeated. "And it gave us this message from Bob."

"I can't understand it," said Ned. "I mean I can't understand how the paper popped out just when the alarm went off."

"Because Bob fixed it to do that!" Harry exclaimed. "Here, read this. It's a warning of trouble and we've got to go to the rescue—at once!" he exclaimed.

Then Ned read the note. It was plainly in Bob's handwriting, which the chums well knew, and signed with his name: It said:

"Fellows, I'm off on my own to investigate the old shack. Wanted to do it by myself in the quiet of the early morning so I slipped out of my room. I don't believe anything will happen but if I should not come back at noon better come and look for me. I'll be in the old shack on the hill. I'm leaving this tucked behind the clock on the alarm winding screw as I don't want you to fuss about me until I've had a chance. When the alarm goes off I figure the note will pop out and you'll see it."

"Well, it popped out all right," spoke Ned.

"And we got it," added Harry. "Sort of queer for old Bob to do it that way, but then he always was a bit theatrical. And something must have

happened for it's past noon and he isn't back. We'd better go after him!"

"Yes," Ned agreed. "I wonder what his game is and I wonder how he got out of his room without passing George."

"We'll find that out when we rescue him," stated Harry. "I only hope it isn't a false alarm."

"False alarm! What do you mean?"

"I mean that now he has worked us up to the point of expecting to rescue him, I hope we can pull it off. I mean I hope we don't meet him half way there, coming home after having been to the shack and solved the mystery."

"When Bob says noon he means noon," was Ned's opinion. "I'm afraid something may have happened to him." Ned's face and voice showed his anxiety.

"Then don't lose any time!" exhorted Mr. Bardley. "We must hurry to the old shack."

"Is there anything there that might harm him—I mean anything in the shack itself?" asked Ned.

"No," was the answer. "The shack is just a small building, but what I'm afraid of is those men. If they found out Bob was there—but they haven't anything against him. No, he would be in no danger from them. The only thing that could happen—"

Mr. Bardley did not finish the sentence. He was on the verge of it when George cried:

"Heah dey come!"

"Who?" asked Harry.

"Dem men in de red car! Heah dey is—"

They never knew what prompted Mr. Bardley to rush out as he did—rush out of the kitchen door almost into the arms of three men who had just come around the corner of the house. In an instant they had caught hold of the banker, thrust a sack over his head and before Harry and Ned could get into action, before the slow-moving and, evidently, slow-witted Negro could fulfil his duty as bodyguard, the intruders were carrying Mr. Bardley away.

"Stop them!" cried Harry. "The kidnappers!"

He was fumbling in his pocket for his automatic, forgetting that on his return to the house and in preparation for the noon meal, he had laid it aside, as had Ned and Mr. Bardley, so they were all unarmed. George, in the task of getting the meal, was likewise defenseless. Murchison had remained with the boat at the dock so the three men had matters their own way.

Before the startled eyes of the boys the men rushed with Mr. Bardley to where the red auto, with one man at the wheel, was panting in front of the house and a moment later it was speeding down the road with the captive.

"What do you know about that?" yelled Harry as he and his chum stood looking at the disappearing car.

"Some nerve!" commented Ned. "They're desperate men! We've got to do something!"

"We should have done it before it was too late!" commented Harry. "What fools we were to lay aside our guns! If only Bob had been here! This is fierce. Now they've got Bob and your uncle."

"It isn't at all sure they have Bob," commented Ned as he ran back toward the house. "Though I admit it looks bad—him not coming back. We've got to notify the police and then see what we can do. I'll telephone and then we'll get in my flivver—"

"You can't telephone," Harry reminded him. "The wire's cut!"

"That's so. Uncle Jason should have had it repaired first thing this morning. No, we can't 'phone. But we can go to the police station in the car and give the alarm, or stop at the first telephone we come to."

"When we're in the flivver we might as well keep right on going to the police station," Harry said. "We'll probably lose time looking for a telephone."

"There's one in Mr. Waterby's house," Ned stated. "But that's quite a ways from here. I guess the flivver is the best bet. Come on!"

But when they raced to the barn where the car was left a groan of dismay from Ned caused Harry to ask:

"What's the matter now?"

"Flat tire! I should have looked at this bus first thing this morning, but I forgot, wondering what

had happened to Bob. Now we shall have to telephone!"

"You work on the tire and I'll go telephone," suggested Harry. We'll need your car, anyhow, to go to the shack to see about Bob."

"That's so. Well, hop to it! Gee, but I hope they don't hurt Uncle Jason! Of all the raw, nervy deals—"

Harry did not stop to hear more, but sped in the direction of Si Waterby's house about a quarter of a mile down the road. He reached it, panting from his run, and grabbed the telephone but had some little difficulty making the official in charge at police headquarters understand what had happened. When he did understand, Harry was told that all available officers would be sent out on the trail. The boy did not mention Bob as he thought that rescue could best be effected by the chums of the missing lad.

"We'll git th' state police out, too," said the Portchester official.

Harry hurried back to the old mansion to find Ned completing the changing of the tire. The two lads leaped into the flivver and were soon racing down the road in the direction of the old shack on the hill. Before they left they called Murchison up to the house to stand guard with George.

"Don't let anyone in until we get back!" warned Ned.

"We won't!" Murchison said.

It was only a short run to the shack. But when it was in sight Ned stopped the car with a suddenness that nearly threw Harry out.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Aren't you going up to it and get Bob?"

"Yes, but I want to make sure, first, that none of those men or any of their gang are around."

A casual outside inspection showed no intruders and then, listening and proceeding cautiously, Harry and Ned went inside. They saw the two empty front rooms and went into the kitchen beyond.

"He isn't here!" exclaimed Ned.

"We're too late!" murmured Harry.

They were about to turn away when they heard a moan or a groan. Startled they listened. They heard a faint voice calling:

"Ned! Harry!"

"He's in there!" cried Ned pointing to the closet door.

Then the two sprang to the rescue.

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER SEARCH

WITH eager hands Ned threw back the spring bolt on the door and pulled it open. The inrush of light into the dark interior revealed Bob Dexter lying almost unconscious on the floor. The two boys staggered back from the outrush of death-laden air but this lasted only a moment.

"Pull him out where he can get fresh air!" cried Ned, stooping down to get hold of his chum.

"He ought to have water!" added Harry.

"There's a spring outside—I saw it as we came in!" Ned reported. "Gee, I hope he isn't dead!"

"He was alive a moment ago—he called to us," Harry said as he caught up a small pail from the kitchen table and ran to fill it at the spring at the door of the shack.

Fresh, oxygen-laden air, however, was what Bob mostly needed and when his lungs began to fill with that, his eyes, that had been closed, slowly opened and his cheeks, pale beneath their tan, reddened.

Before the young detective could answer, Harry came back with the water and that further aided the reviving influence of the air. After he had

taken a little of the water, sitting up on the floor of the shack, supported by the arms of his chums, Bob was able to speak.

"Glad you got here," he murmured, though not with much force.

"Sure we got here!" exclaimed Ned.

"Just about in time, too," Harry added. "We got your message."

"Then the alarm clock went off?" asked Bob.

"Sure!" answered Ned. "But why did you set the hour so late?"

"I thought I'd be back long before it sprung," Bob went on, his voice gaining strength. "But I couldn't make it."

"Did they get you?" Harry wanted to know.

"Who?"

"The men in the red car."

"No, they didn't get me, but they were here," Bob answered, "I 'got' myself, so to speak. Went in that closet, though I should have noticed the spring lock, and the wind blew the door shut. I was caught like a rat in a trap."

"Are you sure the men didn't shut the door?" asked Ned.

"No, they didn't arrive until after I was locked in. Why so many questions about the men?"

"Because they got Uncle Jason!"

"Got your uncle? How?" Bob was quite himself again now, and able to stand up. His voice showed his eager excitement. "How'd they get him?"

"Kidnapped him, almost under our noses," Harry explained and then he and Ned, taking turns, blurted out the story.

"Whew!" whistled Bob. "That's acting with a vengeance. I wish I'd been there."

"We wish the same!" exclaimed Ned. "We had to choose between racing after the kidnappers or coming to get you. And knowing how fast that red car is I decided we'd never get within smelling distance of it. So we decided to come and get you and then, together, we could take up the chase in the old flivver."

"Well, I'm glad you came to get me," Bob murmured. "If you hadn't, I think, in a little while longer, I wouldn't have been worth taking out. Thanks—a lot!" He meant more than the words indicated.

"We thought it rather queer that you should shoot out this way, all by yourself," remarked Ned.

"Perhaps I made a mistake," Bob admitted. "In some ways I think I did. Though I heard some things the men from the red auto said, it wasn't enough to give me the clue I wanted as to why they are so anxious to get this shack. And now, since they have your uncle, Ned, we've got to start on another chase and I won't have time to do much more here."

"Did you find out anything at all?" asked Harry.

"Not a thing, except that the closet you took

me from is air-tight. I found that out to my cost," and Bob related his efforts to free himself, and his consternation when he found he had no knife. "If I'd had that it would have been easy," he said. "However I'm quite all right now."

"There's one thing maybe you wouldn't mind explaining," spoke Ned.

"What's that?"

"How did you get out of the house without George seeing you?"

"Climbed down a rope out of my window."

"We didn't see any rope," said Harry.

"I looped it and pulled it away when I landed. That's how I lost my knife. But we're losing a lot of time talking here. The thing to do is to take after those men who have your uncle, Ned."

"I guess that's right. He must be scared stiff—if—if something worse hasn't happened to him," he said, with a little catch in his voice.

"You—you don't think they'd do—do anything *desperate*, do you?" asked Harry in troubled tones.

"There's no telling what such men would do," Bob responded. "But I don't see why they would go to extreme lengths. Mr. Bardley is of more value to them alive than he is—well, than if they harmed him," Bob quickly made a little substitution of words as he caught a look on Ned's face.

"Well, let's get after 'em!" Ned exclaimed. "We're only wasting time talking here—that is if you're all right to go, Bob."

"Sure I'm all right. Nothing happened except that I was almost smothered. Is the flivver in good shape?"

"Except we haven't a spare," Ned answered, telling about the flat he had so quickly changed.

"We'd better stop and have it put in shape," Bob decided. "There's no telling how long this chase may last and we might get a puncture. A little more delay isn't going to do much harm."

"Guess not," agreed Ned. "That red car, with my uncle in it, must be miles away from here now. We can't exactly chase 'em."

"What can we do, then?" asked Harry.

"We'll have to trail 'em," Ned answered. "That is if Bob can pick up the trail."

"That red car is conspicuous enough so that it will be easily noticed and remembered," Bob stated. "We'll get the spare tire mended, and then take the road. By making inquiries along the way we ought to be able to pick up the trail."

"It isn't going to be easy," Ned stated. "Not with the habit that car has of appearing on this side of the lake one minute and on the other side in less than a quarter of an hour. You didn't solve that secret yet, did you Bob?"

"Not yet, but I'm going to. Come on, now, let's go."

As they moved to the flivver, Bob feeling quite himself now, Harry asked:

"Wouldn't it be a good thing, now that we're

here at the shack to see if we can find out anything about it?"

"No time for that now!" Bob decided. "If there's a secret about this place, and I believe there is, it's so well hidden that it will take quite a while to solve it. We can come back here. The thing to do now is to get Ned's uncle."

"I hope we can," Ned murmured. "Look here, Bob," he went on, "do you think there's something secret about this shack that my uncle is trying to hide—from us as well as from the men in the red auto."

Bob Dexter did not reply at once. When he did speak it was with serious inflection and he said:

"I don't know. I wish I did. There are more queer things about this mystery than I thought, at first, there were. It seems queer that these men want the shack—it seems queer that your uncle won't sell it to them, especially as he said they offered more than it was worth from a real estate standpoint. It's queer why there should be such an airtight closet in it. But all those puzzles will take time to solve and time is something we haven't any too much of now. Let's get going, fellows!"

A little later they were on the trail again, Bob having locked the shack with the same skeleton key he had used to gain entrance. Ned and Harry uttered surprised exclamations as they noted

what preparations he had made for doing his lone investigating.

"Which, so far, has resulted in a net of zero," Bob remarked as they chugged along in the flivver.

"Oh, you'll do it yet—never knew you to fail when once you set your mind on a thing," complimented Ned.

"Thanks! Save the oil for the car!" chuckled Bob.

They stopped at a gas station to have the punctured spare put in shape to use if they needed it and then hurried back to the old mansion to see if George or Murchison had any news. They found the Negro on guard, locked in the kitchen, but the mechanic was not there.

"Where is he?" asked Ned.

"He went out soon after yo' gen'men went," George explained.

"Where did he go?"

"He didn't say, but I done seed him headin' fo' de dock."

"I'll take a run down there and see if he knows anything," Bob offered. "You fellows grab anything you think we might need on the chase and stuff it in the car. We may be out all night."

"That's right," Ned agreed. "I don't want to come back until I locate my uncle."

He and Harry packed a few things for themselves and some for Bob who soon came running up the hill from the dock, calling:

"Murchison has gone and taken the boat."

"Then he must have some clue!" Harry suggested.

"Perhaps," Bob admitted. "Well, we've got two private parties out, now, after the men in the red auto. I don't count the local police. It will be too bad if one of us doesn't land something."

"Whut yo' all want me t' do?" asked George as they were about to drive off.

"Stay here and keep your eyes open," advised Bob. "We may call you up on the 'phone now and again."

"How can you when the wires are cut?" asked Ned.

"That's so! Hang it, I forgot about that. We'd better—"

"Mr. Murchison he done fix de 'foam," George said. "He tied de wires. She talks now."

"Does it? Good!" Bob cried. "Wait, I'll try it."

He had no difficulty in getting central who assured him that the instrument was now in order again.

Then the three chums started off on the trail, a journey that was to have surprising results at the end.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ABANDONED BOAT

"WHAT shall we do first?" asked Ned when they had swung out of the drive of the old mansion and were on the lane, or private road, that led into the main highway.

As if by prearrangement he and Harry looked at Bob. The young detective was equal to the occasion.

"We've got to find which direction that red auto took after the men kidnapped your uncle, Ned," stated Bob Dexter. "Even then we've got to make a discount."

"Discount! What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"Well," Bob said, "they may have started one way down the road and have been observed by Mr. Waterby, or some of the people who live along the highway. Then, after going a certain distance, they may have doubled on their trail and swung back."

"What's to be done then?" Harry wanted to know.

"We've got to sort of fiddle around," was Bob's opinion. "We'll make some inquiries, locate persons who saw the red car and see what they have

to say. If we get to a blind spot, a place where no one noticed the machine, we'd better think of turning back."

"But you can't expect every house that we stop at to hold some one who saw that car," objected Ned. "That would presuppose that we had a line of scouts out watching for the old fire engine to pass."

"Fire engine?" questioned Harry.

"Well, since that car is such a brilliant red I call it a fire engine," explained Ned.

"Not bad," admitted Harry.

"But what'll we do?" asked Ned again, once more glancing at Bob. "I mean if we lose the trail?"

"That's just what I think we'll do," Bob stated. "And as soon as we inquire at several places, one after another, and find that no one saw the red car pass, it will be pretty good evidence that they doubled on their trail."

"You mean they turned back?" asked Harry.

"Exactly."

"And it will be up to us to do the same?" asked Ned.

"If you fellows agree," said Bob.

"This is your show. You're the doctor," declared Harry. "We'll do whatever you tell us to do."

"Now look here!" burst out Bob. "I don't want you fellows to think that I'm taking this out of your hands. In the first place it's Ned's uncle who's

been carried off and Ned ought to have the say as to what we shall do."

"It's all yours!" Ned declared. "My uncle wanted you to come up here to solve this mystery and you're going to do it."

"All right. I'll do my best," Bob promised. "But I can't think of everything. I have some theories regarding this mystery, but they're not in shape, yet, to talk about. I might be away off and I don't want you fellows laughing at me. So if you have any suggestions I'm willing to adopt 'em—take 'em in and give 'em house room, so to speak. And now if you——"

"'Have tears, prepare to shed them now,'" quoted Harry. But, seeing that Ned looked serious he hastened to add: "No wise-cracks, but I'm willing to leave this to Bob."

"So am I," Ned agreed.

"That's all right," remarked the young detective. "But if, at any time while we're on the trail, you fellows don't believe that I'm on the right steer, just give me a call."

"We will," promised Ned.

So they rode on and, reaching the highway, it was a toss-up which route to take—the right or left.

"Have to chance it, I guess," Bob said. "Though I would suggest that we head toward Mr. Waterby's house. He's a friend of your uncle, Ned, and he may have seen the car."

"It sounds reasonable. I'm with you."

They headed for the farm-house of the man who had brought the midnight message and found him just coming in from having been out in one of his fields. He received the news of the kidnapping of Mr. Bardley with amazement.

"Gosh! No wonder they were going fast," he exclaimed.

"Then you saw them go past your place?" asked Bob.

"I sure did! Like th' wind. No wonder they call that a flying car—it sure was travelin'!"

"We're on the right trail! Come on!" cried Bob.

They hurried away from the home of Mr. Waterby, having far from satisfied his curiosity as to all the details of the taking away of Mr. Bardley. But if they had stayed he would have talked for half an hour or more to no purpose.

"What do you say we stop at the police station in town?" asked Ned when they had left the farmer.

"What's the use?" asked Harry. "I don't believe they'll have found out a thing we can't find out for ourselves."

"Not pinning any bouquets on myself, I agree with you," Bob said. "They haven't a fast car to begin with. And I'll say that Ned's old flivver is fast if it isn't anything else."

"Thanks!" murmured the owner, just saving his load from skidding around a corner, so fast was he going.

"And," resumed Bob, "why complicate matters

by talking to them and delaying our game? I'm in favor of keeping on and inquiring of folks along the lake shore road."

Ned and Harry agreed with this idea and they went on to the next house, a man in which had observed the red auto speeding down the road soon after the time Mr. Bardley was taken away. The boys did not explain why they were making the inquiries, not wanting to go into details about the kidnapping of Ned's uncle.

"It'll be all over town by night, anyhow," Ned remarked.

"Probably," agreed Bob.

So they traveled on, stopping at each house or roadside stand they passed to inquire about the red car. For several miles they were able to trace it. Then, suddenly, they lost it.

That is they stopped at the first house where no one had seen the car pass. This, in itself, meant nothing, since it might easily have happened that no one was in a position to observe it.

But when they had made several such fruitless inquiries Bob said:

"Just as I suspected; they've doubled on their trail."

"Then," stated Ned, "we ought, when we turn back, to find some place that saw the car twice."

"We ought," Bob agreed, "but for one thing."

"What's that?"

"When those men who kidnapped your uncle doubled on their trail, and turned back, as I think

they did, they may not have taken exactly the same road they used in gettin' away."

"That's so," Ned exclaimed. "The main road follows the lake shore, and that's the one we've been trailing the men on. But here is another road, back of the main one, which also parallels the lake, and which goes all the way around it. They may have switched to the back road, as it's called."

"That's what's going to gum up the works, I think," said Bob.

And it did.

The boys turned back after having made fruitless inquiries at several houses, which would indicate that the red auto had not passed. But when they returned to the last place where it was positive the elusive car had been observed, there was no recollection on the part of the observers that it had been noted retracing its route.

"Then they've taken the other road!" decided Ned.

"Looks so," admitted Bob. "And we'll do the same."

But here the trail was lost. They reached a place where the main shore road turned into the less-traveled highway, but could get no record of the car having been observed. Nor were their inquiries along the back road successful.

"It seems to have just disappeared," Harry remarked when they were at a complete loss. "It didn't go back on the main road and no one saw it on the back road. Where is it?"

"That's what we've got to find out!" exclaimed Bob.

They cast about like hunters and dogs that have lost the scent of the fox and finally located what they thought was the place where the car had "disappeared," as Ned called it.

"But where could it go?" asked Harry, indicating a dense patch of woods between the back road and the lake. "There's not a trail in there that a wheelbarrow could take. How did any car cut down into that jungle?"

"It does seem strange," Ned admitted.

Bob, who had taken the wheel to relieve his chum, suddenly started the car back along the way they had come. His companions did not question him. It was getting late and they were tired. Soon they glimpsed the lake through the screen of trees.

"Going to have a swim?" asked Harry, listlessly.

"No. I'm going to start all over again," Bob said. "We've missed out somewhere." Then, suddenly, he pointed to a small, sandy beach on the shore of the lake. "Look!" he exclaimed.

"Uncle Jason's motor boat!" cried Ned.

"And abandoned!" added Harry as a second look confirmed his first suspicion that the *Sunfish* was unoccupied. "Come on, fellows!"

CHAPTER XVII

ABOARD THE BOAT

"WAIT a minute!" exclaimed Bob Dexter.

He laid a hand on the arm of Harry who, taking the lead, was about to rush down the little slope toward the water where, with the waves lapping at her stern and her bow rammed into the sand, lay the *Sunfish*.

"What's the matter?" asked Harry, in some surprise. "Don't you want us to go aboard Mr. Bardley's boat. It *is* your uncle's boat, isn't it, Ned?" he inquired, thinking, for a moment, that some mistake had been made.

"It's Uncle Jason's boat all right," Ned declared.

"I haven't the least doubt of it," Bob responded.

"Then why not go aboard and see if we can get any line on this mystery?" demanded Harry.

"It's good advice, though I didn't originate it," Bob said slowly, "not to run into a trap."

There was such meaning in his tones that both his companions looked at him in startled surprise. Ned had come to a halt when Harry's progress was stayed by Bob's grip on his arm.

"You mean that's a trap?" asked Harry in a low voice.

"Do you think," added Ned, "that those men may be aboard and that they have run the boat ashore as a sort of bait for us?"

"Possibly," Bob answered. "Though, truth to admit, I don't see any signs of the men. But they may be concealed in the cabin."

"Didn't Murchison take the boat away?" asked Harry.

"For all we know he did, yes," Bob admitted. "But that doesn't say he didn't run it ashore—"

"With those men or for those men!" broke out Ned. "I see what you mean, Bob. You think this fellow Murchison, that my uncle hired to help him, turned traitor, Bob, and helped to kidnap him. I never thought of that."

"I didn't, either," said Bob, more calmly than the occasion seemed to warrant. "I never said Murchison was a traitor."

"That's right, he didn't," Harry cut in.

"Well, I thought you meant that," Ned remarked.

"I don't know just what I do mean, or, rather, I don't know just what to think," Bob resumed. "All we know, or, at least all you two fellows know, is that Mr. Bardley was taken away in the mysterious red car by those four men—crooks I guess it's safe to call them. All we three, jointly, know, is that we made a search for 'em, couldn't find 'em and then we come along here and see the

boat which is missing when we get back to the old mansion after my rescue. Now it may well be that Murchison is in with the gang. It is also an even bet that he isn't. But here's your uncle's boat, Ned, and we don't want to go aboard her until we find out whether she's in charge of Murchison or those men."

"How are we going to find out?" asked Ned.

"By observation, the first thing, I should say," spoke the young detective. "I don't believe, if there is anybody on board, that they have seen us. We're pretty well screened here on the bank."

This was true enough. They had left the car on the road which, at this point, was well hidden behind a line of trees and bushes. The boys had made their way down the slope, almost to the water, using the same sort of cover, dense foliage. Thanks to Bob's precaution, they had not burst out on the lake beach. Consequently they were still back of the green, leafy screen.

"You mean we should hide here for a while and sort of look things over?" asked Harry.

"That's it. If those men have captured the boat from Murchison, which is possible, they'll show themselves sooner or later. If Murchison is still in possession, and has merely run the boat ashore to follow the kidnapper himself, or to get some supplies, he, too, will show himself sooner or later."

"And if no one shows aboard then you think we can go aboard the *Sunfish* ourselves?" asked Ned.

"That's it, yes. Of course there is something else to be taken into consideration."

"What's that?" asked Bob's chums.

"It may well be," he said, "that Murchison decided to have a hunt for the kidnappers, to release Mr. Bardley, on his own hook, so to speak. He may have sighted them on the shore road in their red car as he was cruising along near the beach. And he may have run the boat ashore and taken after them. In that case we'll have a long wait. In any other case we shan't have to hide here and watch very long. If anyone is aboard, especially if there are the four men with your uncle a prisoner, Ned, one of them will make a move soon."

"I hope so," exclaimed Harry. "It's maddening to stay here and do nothing. I want some action!"

"So do I!" agreed Ned.

"That's the hardest part of the work in solving mysteries," said Bob. "Just waiting. But often it's the best thing to do. I think, if you fellows want to do something, though, you can."

"What?" exclaimed the two in a short duet.

"Go back and lock Ned's car, after you run it off the road. It may have to stay there some time if we start a boat cruise."

"That's so!" cried Ned. "We'll do it. Come on, Harry."

"I'll stay here and watch," offered Bob, settling himself on a stump from which, through the

screen of bushes, he could have a good view of the stranded *Sunfish*.

Ned and Harry, moving cautiously, went back up the hill to where they had so hastily abandoned the flivver. The ignition had been switched off but the car was not locked. This Ned attended to after he had run the machine off the road into a little glade well screened and protected.

"It won't hurt it any to stay out a few nights, even if it rains," Ned remarked. "It's had the same sort of treatment before."

"Yes, I guess nothing can damage it much," assented Harry.

They rejoined Bob who reported that there had been no sign of life aboard the motor boat.

"How much longer you going to wait?" asked Harry, impatiently.

"About ten minutes," Bob answered, glancing at his watch. "I'm beginning to believe there's no one on the *Sunfish*."

"Then my uncle is still a prisoner of those men," spoke Ned, a note of anxiety in his voice.

"That isn't at all certain, but it's probable," was Bob's reply.

Never did any ten minutes seem longer than that particular ten during which Bob and his chums watched and waited. They watched to see any signs of life that might be manifested on board the stranded boat. And they waited while the hands of Bob's watch slowly crept around the circle. At last he exclaimed:

"Time's up! Let's go!"

"Not a sign of life!" murmured Ned.

"But we'd better be careful," cautioned Harry as they prepared to advance toward the silent craft.

"Oh, sure!" agreed Bob. "No use taking any chances even though everything looks all right."

The boys approached the *Sunfish* from three angles. They did not want to run the risk of an attack which might at once overwhelm the whole trio. By thus dividing, at least one lad might escape.

They could draw near the boat under cover of trees and bushes until within about twenty-five feet. This was the width of the beach which was a bare stretch of sand and pebbles. It afforded no cover. They had arranged a signal to time their joint rush once they got into the open. Suddenly Bob whistled a few bars of a popular air to indicate he was ready. A moment later there came an answering tune from Ned.

Harry was a bit longer in signifying that he, also, was on the alert as he had a bit farther to travel. But at length his signal came and then, as arranged, all three left their protective screens of trees and bushes and rushed across the stretch of beach that lay between the shore of foliage and the water's bare edge.

Each one had drawn his automatic to be ready for any hostile demonstration, but none came. All

was as quiet aboard the *Sunfish* as it had been during their anxious watch.

Bob was the first to climb up over the bow where it had rammed into the sand. He gave a hasty glance into the cabin, the only place where the men could have been concealed, or where Murchison might have been asleep.

"No one here!" called Bob. "Come on!"

Ned and Harry scrambled up to join Bob on the little deck. They were in possession of the craft. What the next move was none of them had fully decided.

"Look," Ned said in a low voice, "somebody threw out the anchor."

The small, four-pronged anchor was embedded in the sand about ten feet from the bow.

"Taking no chances of drifting off," remarked Harry. "Though she's pretty well grounded."

"It's the best thing to do," remarked Bob. "Now then—"

He paused and the three chums looked apprehensively at each other.

From the forward motor compartment came a deep groan as if some one was in great agony.

CHAPTER XVIII

CAUGHT IN THE STORM

"WHAT's that?" whispered Harry, his fingers tightening on the butt of his automatic.

"Some one in trouble," declared Ned, in a low voice.

"Sounded like some one groaning," murmured Bob.

"My uncle!" exclaimed Ned. "They must have him trussed up in that motor compartment! Maybe's he's hurt. Or maybe Murchison—"

"We've got to see who it is," decided Bob. "Come on, boys, but have your guns ready. It may be a trick after all—or a trap!"

Cautiously they approached the forward compartment which held the motor. It was covered by two hinged covers, opening like the hood of an automobile, but now both sides were down. If there was a man in that engine room he must be pretty well cramped.

"I'll open one side," Bob said, "and you fellows stand ready with your guns."

"From the way that fellow's groaning he's in no condition to put up a fight," Harry remarked.

"No matter! Take no chances!" commanded

Bob and his chums deferred to him. "Ready now," murmured the young detective.

Slowly he raised one side of the hinged cover while, with ready automatics, Ned and Harry leaned forward. Then, as the light penetrated the dark motor compartment a cry of surprise broke from the three boys.

For there, lying in a crumpled heap, was the form of Sam Murchison, the mechanic who had recently been hired by Ned's uncle. The man was groaning and appeared to be insensible, the moans of pain being forced from him automatically.

"Murchison!" cried Ned, dropping his gun and starting to enter the compartment. "What happened?"

"He's hurt!" exclaimed Harry. "See the blood!"

There were crimson marks on the man's head and some were spattered over the motor. Murchison held a monkey wrench in one hand and he seemed to have collapsed from being struck as he bent over the motor.

"Those men!" cried Ned. "First they kidnap my uncle and then they attack Murchison. We've got to get the police after them!"

"The sooner the better, if it can be done," Bob agreed. "But they didn't attack this man."

"How do you know?" Harry demanded.

"I'll tell you after we get him out of that place. He isn't badly hurt, I think, just sort of knocked out and fresh air will revive him. He's been al-

most smothered in there, with the fumes of gasoline and lack of good air to breathe. Get him on deck!"

This was done, not without some difficulty and, as Bob had said, Murchison soon revived when some water had been sprinkled on his face and a little forced through his lips.

"Oh—you boys!" murmured the mechanic when he opened his eyes and saw the chums. "Where—where did you come from?"

"We've been trying to locate my uncle," Ned explained. "We happened to see this boat, stranded, so we came aboard. Did those men attack you?"

The man shook his head. Talking wasn't easy just yet, but he was rapidly recovering. The wound on his head proved to be a slight one.

"No," he finally said, "I wasn't attacked. I knocked myself out by my own carelessness."

"The monkey wrench, wasn't it?" asked Bob. "I thought so," he added, as Murchison nodded a confirmation.

"Soon after you boys went to follow the kidnapers," he explained as he got to his feet, for now he was almost recovered, "I thought I'd take the boat and see if I could get any trace of 'em along the lake. I got here when the motor began to miss so I ran ashore, threw over the anchor and started to make some repairs. I was letting the motor idle, to test it when my wrench got caught in the flywheel as I carelessly leaned over and it

was driven against my head with terrific force. I was knocked out and as I dropped the covers, which I hadn't propped back, fell and closed and I was shut in. That's all I remember until I saw you boys bending over me."

Bob explained what he and his chums had done, how they had waited until they thought it was safe and then come aboard the boat.

"Then we heard you groaning," Ned added.

"I didn't even know I was doing that," remarked Murchison. "But I'm glad you boys are here. What do you want to do?"

"Are you able to navigate?" asked Bob.

"Of course I am. Takes more than a whack like that to knock me out. I'm all right."

"Is the *Sunfish* in shape for a cruise?" asked Bob.

"All set," was the answer. "There's plenty of grub aboard, and I filled the gas and oil tanks before I started out on my own hook. We can travel pretty well around the lake before we have to put in."

"Then let's travel!" exclaimed Bob. "We may get more of a trace of these men along the lake than by shooting here and there on land in your car, Ned."

"Suits me! Only I hope we find Uncle Jason."

"Yes," added Harry. "He must be in a lot of trouble."

"Those men have him—or they had him—for some reason I can't guess," murmured the me-

chanic. "He was in deadly fear of them—why I don't know—but with good reason, it seems."

"Yes," Bob agreed, "they're desperate men. The sooner we get Mr. Bardley out of their clutches the better for him. Well, can we get going soon?"

"Right away," Murchison said. "The motor's in good shape now. I had it fixed just before I sort of knocked myself out and I was going to push off. You boys can now, if you want to. Pull up the anchor and I think the propeller will pull us out of the sand if you give the engine enough gas."

They were soon afloat, the boys taking charge, as each of them knew how to run a boat. They had proved this when they were at Belport, the previous summer, solving the mystery of the seaplane.

"You take it easy for a while," Bob said to Murchison as he watched the mechanic enter the small cabin. "You need a bit of rest."

"Yes, I guess I do. I'll lie down. My head aches fierce. Call me if you need me."

This Bob promised to do and then joined his chums on the small deck just aft of the cabin, the doors of which he closed.

"Well," asked Ned, suggestively, as he gripped the steering wheel.

"Queer doings!" observed Harry.

"Yes," Bob admitted, "very queer."

"But it proves, doesn't it," asked Ned, in a low voice, "that Murchison is straight? He had nothing to do with the kidnapping of my uncle. Other-

wise he wouldn't have been alone aboard this boat. What do you say, Bob?"

"I'd rather not say anything, just yet."

"You mean you still suspect—him," and Ned nodded toward the cabin in which lay the injured mechanic.

"It isn't wise to have suspicions until you can prove them," Bob stated. "Once you get a notion in your head about a mystery you're likely to use everything that happens to prove that your notion is the right one. The better way is to examine everything that happens in a sort of independent way and see what it means when contrasted with everything else that has happened. In other words make the happenings fit the case, don't make the case fit the happenings."

"I guess that's good dope," admitted Ned.

"Sure!" Harry agreed.

The *Sunfish* was now traveling along at good speed, and, leaving Ned at the wheel, Bob and Harry proceeded to examine the boat to ascertain how much food was aboard and to plan for the night which would soon be upon them. They found Murchison much improved by his rest and he showed them where the food was stored and initiated them into the mysteries of the gasoline stove in the miniature galley.

The boys were hungry, at least Harry said he was and, for once, his chums did not deride him. They all ate and then held a sort of council of war.

"What'll we do first?" asked Ned.

"We'll leave it to Bob—this is his party," suggested Harry.

"Well, if you're going to do that, I'd say the best thing to do would be to cruise around the lake," stated Bob. "We'll see what we can pick up. Though whether those men will desert their mysterious flying car for some water craft is more than I can say. Anyhow, as long as we're on the lake and have a good boat, I say let's stick to her for a while."

This met the views of his chums and Murchison also voted in favor of it, so the crew was divided into watches for the coming of the night. Darkness came rather early, for the sky clouded up and as Harry turned over the command of the *Sunfish* to Bob, soon after mid-night, he remarked:

"I think you're going to have a storm."

"Feels like it," Bob admitted as he took over his watch. The others went to the cabin and turned in.

Many thoughts surged through the mind of the young detective as he guided the boat down the lake. They were out in the middle now, for it had been decided to go to the lower end and begin the search there, working up along the west shore and then down the east.

"The puzzle seems to be getting harder instead of easier," mused Bob Dexter.

The wind, which had been blowing in fitful gusts suddenly developed more gale-like propensi-

ties and quite a little sea was soon kicked up on the usually calm lake. The *Sunfish* dipped her nose into good-sized waves and the spray wetted Bob even though he was protected by the trunk-like cabin.

"Going to be a nasty night!" he murmured.

His prophesy was soon borne out. The wind increased in power and the waves in height until the craft was wallowing her way through them pitching and tossing like a miniature liner.

"I hope she's a sound boat," mused Bob. "If she isn't built to stand being knocked about like this she may spring a leak. I never knew Lake Winabog could kick up such a fuss."

He held the boat as nearly on her course as he could, and tried to pierce the gloom ahead of him for a sight of the lights of any other craft.

"Though I don't believe many will be out on a night like this," Bob told himself.

Then it began to rain, gently at first but soon with such a downpour that Bob lashed the wheel for a moment to reach inside the sliding cabin door to get his slicker, which he had hung there in readiness for such an emergency.

The wind whipped the rain inside the cabin and awakened Ned who called:

"What's the matter?"

"Fierce storm!" Bob answered.

"Want any help?"

"No—thanks—I can manage! Just getting my slicker." Bob donned this coat and took the wheel

again. The storm was now at the height of its fury, the wind howling, the rain pelting down and the waves slapping at the *Sunfish* as though to batter her to bits.

Suddenly, out of the gloom ahead of him, Bob saw a dark shape loom. Quick as a flash he pulled the reversing lever of the motor to check the way of the boat but instinctively he felt that he was too late. In another instant he felt the bow strike with such force as to send a tremor through the entire craft. Then the boat ceased moving, being held at the mercy of the storm.

CHAPTER XIX

MAROONED

"WHAT happened, Bob?"

"Did we hit something?"

Thus Ned and Harry called to their chum at the wheel, following the crash in the storm of the night. Hardly had the echoes of the boys' voices died away than Murchison called:

"Anybody hurt?"

They had all been roused from their slumbers by the sudden stopping of the *Sunfish*.

"I don't know what we hit, but we hit something!" Bob answered. "Where's the switch of the searchlight?" he asked for he had noted that modern convenience in the bow of the craft earlier in the night.

"I'll turn it on!" offered Murchison, "but I can pretty nearly guess what we're up against."

"What?" asked all three lads. Ned and Harry were preparing to go out on the after deck to join Bob who still held the wheel though it was useless. For, following the reversal of the motor, which did not prevent the collision, Bob had shut off the power.

"We have probably hit Rattlesnake Island,"

said the mechanic. "It's about in the middle of the lake, but I didn't think we were that far down."

"Rattlesnake Island!" murmured Harry. "Are there real snakes on it, Mr. Murchison?"

"I'll say there are!"

"It's an island, all right, anyhow," Bob asserted. "I just got a glimpse of it when the lightning flashed." For that phase of nature's power was now added to the other outbursts of the fierce storm.

"I hope we didn't ram it too hard," remarked Murchison. "If we can pull off this shore and get around to the other side there's a little cove there where we can anchor and ride out the storm."

"I reversed as soon as I could," Bob stated. "But it loomed up all of a sudden. Rattlesnake Island, eh? Nice place to land on in the dark and storm."

"I'm hoping we won't have to land," remarked the mechanic. "There's your light," he went on, as he found the switch of the powerful lantern in the bow. The beam showed waves dashing on a sandy, pebbly shore and, back of the little beach, a mass of storm-tossed trees and bushes. "Lucky we didn't hit a rocky shore," Murchison went on. "I think we can pull off. Everybody go as far astern as he can get and then start the engine full speed in reverse, Bob," he advised.

He, together with Ned and Harry, having donned their slickers, got on the after rail of the

Sunfish in spite of the seas that were coming aboard, thrown there by the fierce wind. Bob started the motor, from a switch near the wheel.

At once the propeller began to churn the water under the stern. The *Sunfish* strained and trembled but was still held fast.

"No go!" exclaimed Bob, despairingly.

"Don't give up yet!" cried Murchison. "We've got to get off or we'll pound to pieces here. Keep the motor going!"

Which Bob did with the result that in another minute he and the others felt the boat beginning to move. Slowly she slid off the shelving, sandy beach and in another moment was floating free again, in the midst of the storm which seemed to increase in fury.

"Better let me take the wheel now," suggested Murchison, as he and the two boys climbed back from their perches astern. "I think I can work around to the cove where we'll be sheltered."

"I hope you can," Bob murmured. "I guess maybe it would have been better if we had laid up for the night, especially after the storm began."

"Perhaps," admitted Murchison. "But the damage is done—that is if there is damage, which I'm hoping there isn't. That sand you ran her nose into was soft."

"I'm glad to hear that," Bob remarked.

In the glare of the searchlight, which hardly served to do more than faintly illuminate the pitchy blackness of the night, they got under way

again. Lightning flashes helped some and these, combined with some aid from the lantern in the bow, enabled Murchison to work his way around to the sheltered side of the island without further mishap.

The cove proved to be well sheltered from the blast and when the anchor had been tossed overboard the *Sunfish* was prepared to ride out the gale in comparative safety.

"That is if she hasn't sprung a leak," Harry observed.

"She won't sink, that's one consolation," Murchison said. "She's got water-tight compartments."

"Uncle Jason bought some boat!" Ned remarked.

"That's what he did," agreed the mechanic. "He said he wanted to be sure of safety if he had to get away aboard her in a hurry."

"You mean get away from those men?" asked Bob.

"That's what I mean. But they got him in spite of everything."

"It's a queer case," murmured Bob. "I wish I saw the end of it."

A casual inspection did not disclose any damage to the *Sunfish*, and then those aboard her prepared to spend the remainder of the night in such comfort as was at hand.

Through the hours that followed the storm raged, howled, roared and precipitated rain in

great sheets all about the adventurers. But they were snug and dry in the cabin, though the boat pitched and tossed considerably in spite of her sheltered position. With the dawn, however, the outburst passed and when the sun came up it was possible to appraise the damage to the boat.

"Nothing worth worrying about," declared Murchison as he took an observation over the bow, hanging head down. "I guess we can go on."

But when he came to examine the motor, a little later, he discovered a break which he said would take a day to mend.

"Can you do it with what you have on board?" asked Bob.

"Yes," was the answer. "I bought some spare parts, luckily. So we'll have to lay up here a day. Probably we can get under way again in the morning. So if you fellows want to go ashore there's nothing to prevent."

"Will you need any help?" asked Ned.

"No," Murchison answered. "I can do it alone. In fact that motor cockpit is too small for more than one to get into. I can manage all right. Go ashore if you like."

"What about the snakes?" asked Harry who had more than the usual aversion to reptiles.

"They won't hurt you!" chuckled the mechanic. "They're more anxious to keep out of your way than you are to keep out of theirs. Besides, they always give their rattling warning. Really there's no danger, especially if you keep near shore. And

it will let you have a chance to stretch your legs instead of being cooped up on board all day.

"We might as well then," Bob decided.

So the three boys went ashore after breakfast, leaving Murchison to work over the motor. Rattlesnake island was the largest in Lake Winabog. It was, perhaps about three miles long and a mile across in the widest part. It was covered with trees and bushes except along shore.

"A good place for snakes," declared Ned and Harry said:

"I wish you'd stop talking about 'em!"

It was pleasant after the storm and the boys welcomed the chance to move about freely. Naturally Ned was worried about the safety of his uncle and Bob was beginning to think he would never get at the bottom of the mystery concerning the red car. But they soon gave over their worries and moved about, quite enjoying the chance to explore an island on which they had never before set foot.

"This might be a good place to camp, after we get through with this mystery business," Ned remarked as they walked along.

"What! With all those rattlesnakes?" cried Harry. "Never!"

"We haven't seen a snake yet," Bob chuckled.

"Nor heard one," added Ned.

"I don't want to!" affirmed Harry. "Nasty beasts!"

He glanced nervously about as he and his chums

made their way along the curving shore of the island. They were now out of sight of the cove containing the *Sunfish*. They had come ashore by dropping over the side and wading, as the craft carried no small boat.

"What do you say we strike through the woods and across to the other side of the island?" asked Ned, after a while.

"Through that jungle?" asked Harry, pointing to the thick growth. "Not me! That's just the place for snakes!"

"Oh, rats!" snapped Ned. "Come on, Bob."

"No," objected the young detective, "I think we hadn't better get too far away from the boat."

"Why? Do you think anything might happen?" asked Harry.

"You never can tell," was the reply. "Anyhow let's not get too far away."

"I guess that's good advice," Ned agreed.

They wandered on for perhaps half a mile and then found some wild plum trees bearing fruit. These they hailed with delight and Harry declared he was going to take a hatful aboard to make into plum-sauce.

"Do you think it's safe?" asked Ned.

"What do you mean, safe?"

"I mean they may be poison."

"First I ever heard of poison plums," Ned chuckled. "I'll take a chance."

He quickly ate several, pronounced them good and, after a little wait, during which Harry

showed no ill effects, his chums followed his example.

"I guess they're all right," Ned agreed and they all stuffed their pockets with the plums.

It was nearly noon when the boys turned back, determined to visit the island again after eating aboard the *Sunfish*. As they reached the place where, from the beach, they should have had their first glimpse of the craft, Ned uttered a surprised exclamation.

"What's the matter?" asked Bob, who was in the rear.

"She's gone!" cried Bob. "The boat is gone!"

"Whew!" whistled Bob as he saw the cove devoid of any craft. "We're marooned!"

CHAPTER XX

TAKEN OFF

"TRICKED!" cried Harry as, with his chums, he stood on the shore and looked at the place where the *Sunfish* had floated at anchor. "He tricked us!"

"Who?" asked Bob.

"Murchison!" answered Harry. "He only pretended that the motor was on the fritz so's to have an excuse to have us go ashore. As soon as we were out of sight he hauled up the anchor and skipped out. I tell you he's in league with those men!"

"It sure looks so," admitted Ned. "What do you think, Bob?"

The young detective considered a moment before replying. Then he slowly said:

"Well, it might be so. It's perfectly possible for Murchison to have planned this all to trick us so he could get away and we would be marooned. He might be in with those men. But there's another side."

"What?" asked Ned and Harry in a breath.

"Those men who captured your uncle, Ned,

may also have captured Murchison while we were out of sight."

"How?"

"They could have sneaked up on him while he was working on the motor."

"But they'd have to have a boat to do that, and we didn't see any boat or hear one."

"Not necessarily," Bob said.

"Not necessarily what?" Harry wanted to know.

"Those men may have been on this island," Bob went on. "They may have watched their chance and when they saw us leave they could have waded out, jumped aboard, overpowered Murchison and have escaped with him and the boat."

"By golly, that's so!" admitted Ned.

"But wouldn't we have heard the exhaust of the motor?" asked Harry as he, also, admitted the possibility of what Bob suggested.

"Again, not necessarily," replied the young detective. "We were quite a distance from the cove at the farthest point we reached in wandering along shore. The wind is blowing the wrong way to enable us to hear and, again, they might have let the *Sunfish* drift out of the cove before starting up the motor."

Bob's chums agreed that this was entirely within the range of possibilities.

"So it's a toss-up as to whether Murchison went off by himself, purposely, to leave us ma-

rooned here," suggested Ned, "or whether he was taken for a ride, so to speak, eh, Bob?"

"There's a third possibility."

"What?"

"He may have had a glimpse of those men and have set off after them."

"You mean he may have seen them in a boat?" Harry asked.

"Yes. He hardly could have seen them from shore. This island is too far out in the lake."

"But how did he get the motor going?" asked Ned. "Didn't he say it would take all day to repair it?"

"He did," Bob admitted, "so if we adopt the last theory we shall have to conclude either that Murchison was mistaken as to the extent of damage the motor got by the boat running ashore, or else he deceived us."

"By golly! I don't know what to think!" exclaimed Ned.

"I don't, either," admitted Bob. "But one thing we must think of and that at once."

"What's that?" demanded his chums.

"About getting off this island. I don't know much about it, but it doesn't appear to be a very good place to spend the night. Of course we might make a sort of shelter, if we can't find a shack some fisherman may have at some time used. But, even if we have that luck, what are we going to eat?"

"Boy, you said it!" cried Harry. "It's past lunch-time now!"

"Eat some of those plums," advised Ned, pointing to the hatful Harry still carried.

"Plums are mighty poor eating when you want bacon and eggs," sighed Harry.

"Or chicken livers!" chuckled Bob.

"Oh, cut it out!" snapped Harry.

"What do you think we'd better do?" asked Ned, appealing to Bob.

"We've got to get off this island, if we have to swim," Bob said. "I admit," he went on, "that doesn't seem a very cheerful prospect, as it looks to be quite a ways to either shore. So before we resort to that last chance, I say let's walk around the island. We may find some sort of a boat or we may be able to hail one to come and take us off. You ought to know more about this island and lake than either of us, Ned, for you've probably been here before, visiting your uncle. What do you say?"

"I don't know any more about this place than you do," Ned confessed. "I haven't visited Uncle Jason in some years and when I did come up here with my mother, as a kid, I never went about much. So you can't prove anything by me."

"Well, then the only thing I can suggest," went on Bob, "is that we walk around the island and see if we can rescue ourselves or be rescued. There ought to be a boat coming within hailing distance of this island before night."

"I hope there does," Harry sighed. "I want to eat!"

They were all hungry, but the best they could do in the way of food was to eat the wild plums. Then Bob found a gnarled apple tree that had a few specimens on it and this helped some. The boys filled up on this fruit as they continued their walk around the shore of the island.

Several times they saw boats, sailing, rowing and motor craft, but they were too far away to hear a hail. Somewhat discouraged the three chums kept on their way until it was well in the afternoon. Then, as they made a turn around a point of land that partly enclosed a cove on the opposite side of the island from where the *Sunfish* had been anchored, Bob uttered a cry of joy.

"A fisherman!" he exclaimed, pointing.

The others saw a man in a row boat with his pole. He was several hundred feet out from shore. The noise the boys made in running to the edge of the water in the cove attracted the fisherman's attention and he looked up.

"Will you take us off!" cried Bob.

"Take you off! What's the matter?"

"We're marooned," Ned explained. "Our boat—it—it got away from us."

"All right!" the fisherman assented as he reeled in his line. "I'm not having any luck anyhow. Be with you in a few minutes."

He hauled up his anchor and started to row ashore. In a few more minutes the boys had taken

their seats in his boat and he was pulling for the shore on that side of the lake where Jason Bardley had his home. On the way the boys explained something of their plight, not mentioning, however, all the happenings.

"You're lucky I chanced to go there fishing," commented the man as he bent to the oars. "If you hadn't seen me, like as not you'd have had to stay there all night. And it wouldn't have been good for you."

"Why not?" asked Bob.

"'Cause Rattlesnake Island is haunted! It's a bad place! I wouldn't go ashore there after dark—not for any money!"

CHAPTER XXI

A STREAK OF RED

SILENCE, for the moment, shrouded the boy occupants of the fisherman's boat—a silence broken only by the creaking of his oars—a silence that followed his announcement. Then Bob slowly asked:

"What do you mean—haunted?"

"Ghost noises," answered the man who had announced his name as Bart Thorberg.

"Ghost noises!" repeated Ned.

"Yes."

"We didn't hear any," Harry remarked.

"Maybe you wasn't there long enough and maybe you didn't go to the right place. Anyhow you didn't stay after dark."

"No, we only landed this morning and it isn't much past noon now," said Bob. "As for the right place—we kept to the shore line."

"That's it," exclaimed Thorberg. "You can only hear the ghost voices on that hill in the middle of the island."

He pointed to an eminence, clearly visible from where the boat was now, half way to the shore

on which the old mansion was located—the Portchester shore, in other words.

"No, we didn't go there," Ned stated. "Snakes you know."

"Yes, there are snakes," admitted the fisherman. "I saw a lot of 'em the day I got lost on the island and had to stay all night. It was then I heard the ghost voices."

"This sounds mighty interesting," declared Bob. "Tell us about it."

"Well, there isn't a lot to tell," said Thorberg. "I fish for a living and I'm all about this lake, more or less. I used to fish all around Rattlesnake Island and, sometimes, when I didn't have any luck, I'd camp all night on the place. But that was before I heard the voices coming up out of a hole on that hill."

"How long ago was that?" asked Ned.

"Oh, about three weeks—not long. This is the how of it. I was out fishing and, not getting what I wanted, as it grew late, I decided to stay on the island. I landed before sundown, got my fire-wood ready and laid out my grub. Then, as I had a little time, I thought I'd go up the hill. I'd never been there and I won't go again."

"Why not?" asked Harry.

"Well, when I'd made my way up the hill—and I saw some snakes but they wiggled out of my way—I saw a sort of well-hole, or shaft leading down into the ground about the middle of the hill. There was bushes around the edges and I had to go right

close before I could see the hole. It was a sort of rock-lined shaft, going how far down I don't know. But when I leaned over it I heard voices coming up from it—ghost voices—and I didn't stay a second longer. I ran down the hill, got into my boat and rowed home. I haven't been on the island since and I'm not going."

"Is that all you heard—just voices?" asked Ned.

"That was enough, young feller."

"Maybe it was the echo of your own voice you heard coming up out of the shaft," suggested Harry.

"I know echoes and I know my own voice, young feller," stated the fisherman with dignity. "An echo gives you back the same words you speak, but I said nothing like what the ghost voices said."

"What did they say?" Bob inquired.

"I couldn't hear it all," was the reply. "That is I heard a lot of mumbled words and different voices, booming and unnatural like. But when I heard those words I cut and run for it."

"What words?" persisted Bob.

"The ghost voices, or, anyhow, one of 'em said: 'The penalty is death!' That's what I heard as plain as day," declared Thorberg. "I tell you boys, it's a good thing you're off that island."

"Well, yes, it is," Ned agreed with a chuckle. "We were getting hungry and we didn't have any shelter. We're much obliged for taking us off and

we'd like to pay you for your time," he added as the boat drew near a dock on the Portchester shore.

"I don't take money for savin' folks from ghosts!" said the fisherman. "I'm glad to do it. Take my advice, young fellers, and stay away from Rattlesnake Island!"

But when he had landed them, made fast his boat and had walked away, Bob, standing with his chums on the dock said:

"That's just what we won't do."

"What?" asked Harry.

"Stay away from the island."

"You mean you are going there again?" asked Ned.

"Surest thing you know!" exclaimed the young detective. "Boys," he added, "I think we are at the beginning of the solution of the mystery!"

"You mean about Uncle Jason?" asked Ned.

"Yes."

"Do you think he's a captive in some cave on the island?" asked Harry.

"I don't know about that, exactly, but it's one of the things we're going to find out. That's why we're going back to the island."

"Not before we eat, are we?" asked Harry pathetically.

"No, we'll give you a chance to load up on liver," chuckled Bob.

"What about a boat?" asked Ned. "Now that Murchison has skipped with Uncle Jason's, or

has been himself kidnapped in it, how are we going to reach Rattlesnake Island?"

"Get another boat," said Bob, quickly. "The *Sunfish* isn't the only motor craft around here, is she?"

"Guess not," Ned admitted. "You mean to hire one?"

"If we can't get it for nothing," Bob answered. "Now let's get busy."

They went, first, to the place where they had left Ned's flivver and, finding that machine unmolested, rode into town and, after a lunch at a wayside wagon, made inquiries about hiring a motor boat. This they accomplished, engaging the craft, a small cabin cruiser, for a week with the privilege of renewal at a reduced rate. They gave out that they were going to have vacation fun.

Leaving the boat, named the *Perch*, to be fueled and provisioned, the boys hurried back to Ned's uncle's house. They found the Negro, George, on guard, lonesome but otherwise no worse for his adventures.

"No, sah, dey ain't nuffin' done happened," he declared.

"Then you haven't seen Mr. Bardley?" asked Bob.

"Not hide no hair ob him, boss!"

"They still have him—that is if he's alive," said Ned in a low voice.

"He's alive—I'm sure of that," declared Bob.

"As I said before Mr. Bardley is of more value

to those crooks alive than he is dead. All we have to do is to find their hiding place."

"You think it may be on Rattlesnake Island?" asked Harry.

"It may be. Anyhow there's something suspicious there—those voices coming out of the shaft on the hill."

"Ghost voices," Harry murmured.

"Ghost nothing!" chuckled Bob. "I'm not going to say what I think, for, after all, I may be wrong and I don't want to be laughed at. But I've got an idea that I want to try out. Now we'll make one more stop and then we'll start cruising again."

"Where's this one stop?" asked Ned.

"At the shack."

"And are we going to start for Rattlesnake Island with night coming on?" asked Harry, for it was, by this time, late afternoon.

"Why not?" Bob wanted to know. "We'll be aboard the *Perch*."

"Well—all right. Only I was thinking—" Harry did not finish his thought aloud.

They flivvered to the shack on the hill above the bank, and Bob opened the door with a skeleton key. There was no sign of the place having been visited since his rescue. Locking the portal again, Bob led his chums back to the car and they rode to the dock where the motor boat was waiting for them. This time they took with them some changes of clothing, some food and supplies as well as their guns. They left word with George where

they were going with instructions, in case Mr. Bardley was found, for some one to bring word to them.

"You won't ketch dis niggah bringin' you' all no word!" George said, vigorously shaking his head.

"No, sah!"

"Why not?" asked Bob.

"I doan't go t' no island where dey's ghosts!"

"All right. You don't need to bring us word if Ned's uncle is released, or comes back here," Bob said. "Get somebody else to do it. We'll be on the watch for you."

George agreed to do this and then the boys, hope and eagerness in their hearts, set off on their cruise. The *Perch*, while not as new or smart a craft as the *Sunfish*, was more roomy and, though slower, gave them speed enough for the time being.

It was almost dusk when, after a supper on shore, to save, as Harry put it, the grub they had on board, they started for Rattlesnake Island. On the cruise out from Portchester they kept a lookout for any sign of a motor boat that might be regarded with suspicion, but saw none.

"Are we going to land?" asked Harry when, after chugging about for an hour, making almost a circuit of the island, they neared the cove where, before, the *Sunfish* had been anchored.

"Not tonight," Bob decided. "We'll sleep on board."

"And stand watch," added Ned, to which Bob agreed.

This they did, but nothing happened. The night passed quietly and, as Ned remarked with a chuckle when the sun rose:

"Nobody tried to steal the island in the dark."

Breakfast over, Harry acting as cook and giving his chums griddle cakes of no poor quality, Bob decided that a complete circuit of the island should be made before they landed to look and listen down the hill shaft whence, the fisherman had said, came the ghost voices.

"We want to see," Bob explained, "if any boats are anchored anywhere around Rattlesnake Island."

They completed the circuit, seeing nothing suspicious and were about to move back to the sheltered cove to anchor and begin their land investigations when Harry saw a small boat, with an outboard motor, emerging from the harbor.

"Look!" he cried, pointing.

The boat was too far away to disclose anything more than it held three persons, and Bob at once exclaimed:

"Let's chase 'em!"

He opened the *Perch* motor full and took after the other craft which headed for the Portchester shore. But the little boat was speedy and would have gotten clean away except that the outboard engine suddenly stopped, as such pieces of ma-

chinery often do, so the *Perch* overhauled the fleeing craft.

Bob and his chums expected to see some of the men from the red auto and were much disappointed when they drew near enough to observe that the occupants of the outboard craft were only three boys, obviously much frightened.

"What did you try to get away for?" asked Bob as they floated up to the stalled boat.

"We thought you were game wardens," one lad explained. "We were fishing off Rattlesnake Island and we haven't any licenses."

"Gosh!" chuckled Ned. "All our race for nothing! Forget it!" he told the lads. "We don't care how much you fish."

This relieved the minds of the lads, but they decided, after Harry had made a slight adjustment to their motor which enabled it to start again, that they would try some new fishing places. So they moved off up the Portchester shore and the boys in the *Perch* turned about to return to the island.

They cruised about all the remainder of that day without seeing any signs of the suspected men or the mysterious red auto. They passed the night aboard the *Perch*, rousing once, on hearing a noise near where they were anchored. But it proved to have been made only by some wild creature coming to the lake to drink.

The next few days were fruitless ones as far as getting on the trail of the red auto men was

concerned. Between cruising up and down the lake, the boys paid a visit to the old mansion, but George had no word either of Mr. Bardley or Murchison.

"Looks as if we were never going to get at the bottom of this," Ned remarked, when a visit to the police brought no results.

"We'll keep on until we get results!" declared Bob.

Once again they started to cruise in the *Perch*. In a little while they reached a position close to a point, along which the shore road ran. As Bob looked toward the highway, half hidden by trees and bushes, he gave utterance to an exclamation that caused Ned to ask:

"What's the matter?"

"Did you see that red streak shooting along the road?" asked Bob.

"No," Ned had to admit. "Guess I was looking the other way."

"I did!" cried Harry. "It was that red auto and there were at least three men in it. Watch! It ought to come in sight there," and he pointed to an opening in the trees where the road was again in view, about three hundred feet from where Bob had seen the mysterious car.

"Had we better do anything?" asked Harry.

"Do anything, what do you mean?" asked Ned.

"I mean about guarding ourselves. Those birds may shoot at us."

"It wouldn't do any harm to keep a bit under cover," stated Bob. "It's best to play safe."

Accordingly the boys sheltered themselves behind the boat rail and waited. The seconds seemed minutes and the minutes hours.

"Maybe they've fooled us," murmured Ned.

"Take it easy," Bob advised.

Eagerly the boys watched. Traveling at a fast clip, the red car should have come into view again within a few seconds of the time Bob first sighted it. But though the chums waited, they saw no sign of the machine. It had passed an opening in the screen of bushes like a red flash and should have been seen at the next opening. But nothing like this happened.

"Fellows," Bob exclaimed, "we're on the right trail at last!"

CHAPTER XXII

UNDER THE EARTH

BOB DEXTER, who was at the wheel of the *Perch*, swung the craft about so that she headed for the main shore instead of toward Rattlesnake Island.

"Where you going?" asked Ned.

"To make a landing—to trail those fellows!"

"You mean that red auto?" asked Harry.

"You'll never get near that machine at the rate they were traveling. Besides, we're in a boat, on water, and they're on land."

"We're going to trail them!" said Bob.

"But how?" asked Ned. "I think Harry's right."

"Did you notice," Bob remarked, as he still kept the *Perch* headed for the Portchester shore, "did you notice that Harry and I saw the red auto flash past *that* opening, but we didn't see it in that *other* opening," and he indicated the respective breaks in the shore foliage of tree and bushes.

"That's so," agreed Harry, swinging to Bob's viewpoint. "I saw the red car flash past that opening," and he stretched a finger toward it. "But

I didn't see it there," and he indicated the opening nearer the port side of the *Perch*.

"Which means," Bob broke in, "that those fellows are somewhere—in *there*!" He nodded toward a dense clump of trees and underbrush toward which the boat was then headed.

"You mean they've had a breakdown?" asked Ned.

"Not necessarily," answered the young detective. "They may be in hiding there. That's what I'm going ashore to find out—if we can," he added after a significant pause. "That red auto and those men are somewhere in that space, between the two openings where we saw them and then didn't see them, if you get what I mean."

"I get you," Ned admitted.

"So if we search that region," went on Bob, "we may solve the mystery."

"And get Uncle Jason?"

"That remains to be seen. We'll have a go at it, anyhow."

As there was no dock at this part of the lake shore to which the *Perch* could be moored, it was necessary to anchor her out a short distance from shore, and wade the remainder. This the boys made ready to do when Bob called to Ned to heave over the "mud-hook." They carried their shoes and socks in their hands so they would be dry-shod when they started their investigations.

"And I'll put the motor out of commission so

nobody can run off with the boat while we're ashore," Bob said.

"How?" asked Ned.

"I'll take the distributor with me. Like this." The engine of the craft was somewhat like that on an auto, and the distributor was a small piece of hard rubber, like a finger, with certain metal points that made contact with the firing points of the cylinders as it revolved. This piece of mechanism distributed the firing charge of electricity to each cylinder in proper turn and order. Without the distributor the engine won't work, and it was easy to take away and stow in a pocket. Bob did this and they waded ashore, soon putting on their shoes to be able to move about with more comfort.

"Now for some real detective work!" exclaimed Bob as he started off toward the shore road, followed by his chums. They carried a light lunch with them, their flashlights, automatics and a few other things they thought they might need. They could not tell how long they might be on the trail of the red auto.

If Bob hoped to be able to pick up the trail of this mysterious car by the tire marks in the sandy road of the lake shore he was disappointed. When the boys got to the opening where Harry and Bob had seen the flash of the red car, they turned to the right and walked along the highway. Bob looked for tire marks but there were so many and of such variety, that nothing could be ascertained along this line.

"We'll just have to trail along until we find the machine," Bob said. "It ought to be somewhere in this jungle," and he pointed to the dense growth of trees and bushes between the two open spaces.

Following Bob's lead carefully, Ned and Harry scanned the ground as their chum was doing. They were at about the middle of the "jungle," as Bob had called it, walking along the lake side of the highway when Bob suddenly uttered an exclamation.

"Do you see 'em?" cried Ned.

"Not exactly," Bob replied. "But a car has turned in here," and he pointed to a small opening in the bushes. "Turned in more than once, too," he added, showing where there were several plain marks of rubber-tired wheels.

"Why did they turn down here?" asked Harry. "There's nothing here. They'd be headed right for the lake," he added.

"Exactly," Bob agreed. "Come on, fellows!" he called, hurrying along the new trail like a hound that has just picked up a lost scent of a fox. "I think we've got 'em!"

"Then this is why we didn't see 'em pass the second opening," suggested Harry.

"Exactly," Bob answered. "They ran along the shore road, past the first opening where you and I had a red-flash glimpse of 'em, and then they turned in here. They've been down this cut-off before."

"But where do they go?" asked Ned. "Do you

think they're just hiding in among the trees?"

"They might be," Bob answered. "That's what we're going to see."

The place where the red auto had turned at a right angle off the main road, in among the trees, heading toward the lake, was in such a dense patch of foilage that a person not specially looking for this clue would have over-run it. But Bob Dexter was looking for it.

The trail, it could hardly be called more than that, for it was not even a wood-road, led in a winding way down to the lake which was several hundred feet from the road at this "jungle" place. The boys advanced cautiously, their guns held in readiness but, for some time, they neither saw nor heard anything.

"Looks as if they'd given us the slip again," murmured Ned.

"How could they?" Harry asked. "They can't drive across the lake."

"They might have gone to the lake shore and then turned back to the road, at our left," Ned stated.

"But they didn't!" declared Bob suddenly.

"How do you know?" asked his chums.

"They kept straight on!" said Bob.

"Toward the lake?" questioned Harry.

"Toward the lake—yes."

"What did they do when they reached the water?" asked Ned. "Did they skate over it?"

He chuckled, thinking he had Bob cornered. But the young detective quietly answered:

"They didn't skate over the lake, *they rode under it.*"

Ned and Harry were silent a moment and then the latter broke out with:

"Rode *under* the lake! You're crazy! What did they have, a submarine?"

"No," Bob said, quietly enough, "they went in their auto under the lake, beneath the lake. There!"

Suddenly he pulled Ned and Harry toward him—to a spot where he could see what they could not as they were behind a bush.

"They went under the earth!" said Bob, and then Ned and Harry saw a slanting tunnel-like opening leading into the ground and extending in the direction of the water.

"The mystery of the flying car is solved!" Bob went on.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SECRET CAVE

WONDERINGLY Harry and Ned gazed at the slanting hole which started to delve under the earth some distance back from the lake shore. It was a hole, roughly circular, perhaps ten feet in diameter, and the bottom was covered with loose shale and pebbles mixed with sand. The trees and bushes grew in such a way that they made a perfect screen for the tunnel, as it proved to be. Not until an observer had penetrated for some distance into the "jungle" could he perceive the openings. It might have been passed by, even in winter, so dense was the tangle of bushes and second-growth trees.

"Do you think they drove down there?" asked Harry.

"I'm sure of it," Bob answered. "It's the only way to account for the disappearance of the red auto."

"What did you mean when you said the mystery of the flying car was solved?" asked Ned.

"I mean," stated the young detective, "that this tunnel under the lake afforded the men the means of being seen on the Portchester side at one time

and, ten minutes later, in Clayville. There's an outlet on that side, like this, I suppose, and just as well hidden. The red auto would flash along the Portchester shore, slide along this tunnel and reappear on the Clayville shore. No wonder folks thought the red auto flew."

"Well, this may account for one part of the mystery," Ned agreed as he and Harry, with Bob, drew nearer the tunnel opening. "But what about my uncle? Why is he in such deadly fear of the men? This tunnel beneath the lake, granting that it does extend all the way to the other shore, doesn't explain that."

"I know it," Bob admitted. "We've got a lot of work ahead of us yet. But this clears up part of the mystery. It explains how the men could get about so quickly. Their car is fast, but it can't fly."

"Do you think it's safe to go in there?" asked Harry for as Bob drew nearer the tunnel opening it was obvious this was his intention.

"Why not?" asked the young detective.

"It may not be safe," objected Ned.

"You mean those men might capture us?" Bob asked.

"Not alone that," went on Ned. "But that tunnel—it's so dark and—"

"You think it might cave in on us?" chuckled Bob.

"It might—yes."

"Not a chance. Fellows, I've never seen this

tunnel before, and I may be mistaken in assuming that it goes all the way across beneath the lake," Bob said. "But I'm gambling that it does. And it's safe—as safe as a church. It's a natural rocky formation—the course of an old stream, I should say. It's queer folks around here never saw it before, but so it seems.

"It may be," Bob resumed, "that there was a hill of dirt and stones in front of this opening up to within a short time ago. Then heavy rains may have washed it away and these men found it. They also found the opening on the opposite shore. Or it may be it was the other way around. They may have discovered the Clayville tunnel opening before they struck this one. Anyhow they had a short-cut, secret road under the lake from Portchester to Clayville and they've been using it to make their quick disappearances."

"It's mighty queer," said Harry as, with Ned, he followed Bob into the tunnel. "Did you have any idea, Bob, that this was how the men in the red car were making their getaways?"

"I didn't at first," was the reply. "For a while I was at a complete loss. I thought of a small dirigible balloon that might have picked up the car on one shore and, flying across the lake, have deposited it on the other. But a dirigible sticks out like a sore thumb—lots of folks would have seen it and spoken of it.

"Then I leaned to the theory of two cars, but when I found that the same men were seen, within

ten minutes first in Portchester and then in Clayville, I knew it couldn't be that. It is only lately that I figured out there must be some way of getting across the lake. I knew they didn't take the car on a ferry boat, and the car itself isn't an amphibian. So there was only one guess left—a tunnel under the lake and here it is!"

"And we're in it!" exclaimed Harry as they penetrated farther down the slanting stretch of shale, gravel and sand that made up the bed of the tunnel. Owing to the nature of the ground no tire marks of an auto were visible, though Bob held his flashlight down low as did the others.

"But I'm sure they came through this way," Bob said, and his chums agreed with him.

"But where is my uncle?" asked Ned.

"That's what we're going to find out," asserted Bob. "We're on the trail, now, of the men in the red car, and if we locate them your uncle won't be far away."

"I wonder why they captured him?" mused Harry.

"That's one of the hardest things to guess," stated Bob. "They must have some object, naturally. Maybe they are going to hold him for ransom, as a lot of other kidnapping crooks have done with wealthy men of late. Or maybe they want to force him to do something for them or tell them something."

"What?" asked Ned.

"Again that's hard to say," replied the young

detective. "Off hand I'm inclined to think it must have something to do with money. Men don't take desperate chances, such as kidnapping a person, unless they expect to get a good sum from it."

"But who would pay a ransom for my uncle?" asked Ned. "My mother is his nearest relative and while she would be glad to do anything she could to have him set free, she hasn't any money for a ransom. My father hasn't, either."

"I don't believe the kidnappers would look to your family for ransom money," Bob said. "They'd probably want it to come from Mr. Bardley's own fortune. He's rich."

"Yes," Ned admitted, "Uncle Jason is rich but you'd never know it to look at him or his house. But if they have him a prisoner how can they expect him to pay them money, Bob?"

"They'll probably work it through his bank. Anyhow that's what I think. But now we'd better stop talking so loud and skip along through this tunnel."

"Do you think those men might hear us?" asked Harry.

"They might."

"You mean they are in this tunnel?" asked Ned.

"Might be," Bob said, coolly enough. "Anyhow it's best to be a bit cautious."

They walked on into the dark and damp tunnel. They were several hundred feet from the entrance and were going on a fairly smooth and

level road. It would have been easy to drive a car along it. As Bob had said, the tunnel was a natural opening in the rocky formation beneath the bed of the lake. So thick and dense was the rocky roof and sides of the long shaft that only a little water dripped upon the lads, though it was very damp. The darkness was intense, and only the fact that the boys had powerful flashlights enabled them to progress with any safety.

Caustiously they proceeded. They paused now and then to listen but all they heard was the drip of water on all sides of them—drops slowly falling from the damp rocks.

Suddenly Bob stopped, at the same time catching hold of his chums' arms to halt them.

"Listen!" he whispered. "Do you hear voices?"

"Yes!" they whispered.

The tunnel made a sharp turn here. Ahead of them was a blank wall of rock. As they moved silently toward and around the corner it made they came into sudden view of the secret cave. And there, seated on boxes about some lanterns were several men—and the mysterious red auto.

CHAPTER XXIV

PRISONERS

SURPRISE, for the moment, held the three boys motionless. Then, as Harry slightly shifted his position, in order to better his view, he slipped on a pebble and made a noise, slight enough in itself, but sufficiently loud, echoing in the cave and tunnel, to startle the four men who were grouped near the red auto.

Bob had just whispered:

"Well, here they are! Just as I thought!"

Then, with a quickness the boys hardly believed possible, three of the men made a dash in their direction while the fourth member of the gang leaped to his feet and held a big automatic in readiness.

"Spies!" some of the red auto men hissed.

"Has Bardley gotten loose?" another yelled.

"No, he's safe!" a voice answered.

A moment later Bob and his chums were madly fighting their three assailants.

Had the fight taken place in the open, and had the boys even a moment in which to prepare to defend themselves, the outcome might have been different. As it was, however, viciously attacked,

their guns knocked from their hands, the trio were soon at the mercy of their captors. Unfamiliarity with the configuration of the tunnel was also a handicap to Bob, Ned and Harry.

Their attackers knew every inch of the ground, it was evident, and took advantage of each foothold to better their position. The suddenness of the attack knocked the flashlights of the boys from their hands and the only illumination came from the lantern held by the man who had remained in the middle of the cave, which was nothing more or less than a widening, or swelling, of the tunnel.

"Got 'em, Serg?" called the man with the lantern, evidently to one of the three attackers.

"Sure!" was the answer. "I've got two of 'em!"

Bob and Harry knew that the powerful man, in whose grip they felt themselves held helpless, had made the answer.

"Never knew the Gorilla to fail!" chuckled the man who had hold of Ned.

"Can you hold 'em, Serg?" asked the third member of the attacking trio. He stood aside after the first assault and was, evidently speaking to the man known as the Gorilla—the captor of Bob and Harry seemed to be so designated.

"Sure! They're like putty to me. What'll I do with 'em?"

"Bring 'em here!" commanded the man at the lantern.

"O.K., Chief," replied the Gorilla. "Come on now, you two!" he roughly ordered Harry and

Bob. "Any of your tricks and I'll bat you on the heads again."

It was blows on their heads from the butt of the Gorilla's automatic that had rendered Bob and Harry unable to fight back.

Ned had likewise been partially knocked out so it was the rather limp forms of the three lads that were half dragged to the circle of lantern light a few moments later.

"Any more?" asked the man addressed as Chief.

"Not that we could see or hear," replied the Gorilla. "But who are they, anyhow?"

"Some boy friends Bardley sent for," sneered the chief. "He thought they might help him, but you see what it amounts to."

"They got to go some to get ahead of you, Chief!" complimented the Gorilla. By this time Bob and his chums had sufficiently recovered to look at their captors. The Gorilla was like the animal after which he had been named. Squatty, broad of shoulder and with powerful, long arms he was a brute to be reckoned with. The three other men seemed to be foreigners, though they spoke English, of a sort, well enough.

"So, you came spying on us, did you?" sneered the man addressed as Chief. "Well, you see what comes of it!"

"You had better let us go!" demanded Bob. "We don't know what your game is, but we know you kidnapped Mr. Bardley. We admit we trailed

after you to get him back. We've left word, if we aren't heard of within a short time, that a search is to be made. You'll be sure to be found and arrested."

"Oh, yeah?" chuckled the leader. "Well, why didn't you locate us before? 'Tisn't so easy as it sounds. I guess we're safe enough. Now since you lads came monkeying around where you weren't wanted you can't blame us for what happens. We didn't invite you here but, since you came, we'll have the say of when you'll go out."

"Are you going to keep us here?" demanded Ned.

"We sure are!"

"How long and what for?" asked Harry.

"That's for you to find out! You'll have time enough," chuckled the leader. "Tie 'em up, boys!"

Weak as they were from the blows, Bob and his chums managed to put up a game fight in that tunnel cave below the lake. But their strength was nothing against that of the Gorilla and his mates and soon the three boys were bound with ropes, unable to move.

"Stick 'em in the little cave," ordered the Chief. "And then we'll travel along. I guess the coast will be clear now. This is the best piece of luck that could happen. We've got the main-spring and all the works."

More helpless now, than before, Bob and his chums were picked up and taken into a small cave that branched off the larger one. The opening

was closed by a heavy wooden door which was barred on the outside.

Before they were taken into this inner dungeon, Bob had a chance to look about him. The lantern gave light enough to see that the kidnappers, or whatever they were, had made this cave a rendezvous for some time. There were boxes and barrels, some of which had contained food, while others served as tables and chairs. A pail of water with a tin dipper in it, stood in a niche in the rocky wall.

"Bar the door and come on," called the Chief to the Gorilla and the other two men who had carried the captives into the inner cave. "They'll be safe enough until we get back. Lively now!"

The door was slammed shut, and the boys could hear the bar fall into place. Then they heard the roar of the mysterious red auto exhaust. It grew momentarily fainter and at last Bob said:

"They've gone!"

"And left us prisoners!" added Ned.

"Tied up like nobody's business!" groaned Harry. "We sure ran our heads into it this time! Wow, these ropes are tight!"

"Tight as they are, we must try to work them loose!" declared Bob.

"Yes," Ned agreed. "There's no telling what their game is. They may leave us here to starve and—and die!" There was a catch in his voice, strive as he did to hold it back.

"What is their game?" asked Harry as, despite the pain, he tried to loosen his bonds.

"Something criminal," declared Bob. "They got Mr. Bardley out of the way, and now they've made prisoners of us. We were the only ones this gang had to fear, I think, and, now that we are out of the way, they can go ahead."

"Where do you think they have my uncle?" asked Ned, as he, too, twisted and turned, endeavoring to slip some of the ropes.

"He's probably somewhere in this cave or tunnel," Bob said. "We must have a search for him as soon as we get free."

"That's it—can we get free?" sighed Harry.

"We've *got* to!" declared Bob, desperately. "Work hard, fellows! Never mind a little pain."

Then began a struggle for freedom. Ropes had been bound about the wrists of the boys, their arms being crossed behind their backs. Their ankles were also well secured. Fortunately for them no gags had been used so there was none of that horrible, smothery sensation and the trio could talk. They were lying in a row on the dirt floor of a small cave, opening out of the larger one. It was pitch black, but there seemed to be no lack of fresh air.

Luckily for the boys, their captors had been obliged to work fast in securing them and thus some of the knots were not as tightly tied as might otherwise have been the case. Bob had struggled most desperately to prevent being

trussed up and for this reason his bonds were the least secure. After some hard work he succeeded in slipping one knot of the rope around his wrists and after that it was comparatively easy. Though his flesh was cut, bruised and abraded he kept on until his hands were free. He then loosed the ropes around his ankles and a moment later a gleam of light brightened the cave.

"What's that?" cried Harry, in alarm.

"My flashlight," Bob replied. "When I found it was useless to fight I stuck the light in my pocket as I did my automatic. I thought I might need 'em! Found 'em on the floor where those crooks dropped 'em."

"I wish I'd thought to do that," sighed Harry.

"So do I," admitted Ned.

With his flashlight to aid him, Bob cut the bonds of his chums, using his knife. Fortunately the men had only casually searched their prisoners so they still had many of their possessions.

"We're free!" cried Ned as he stood up and chaffed his tingling hands.

"Not free yet," said Bob. "That door's heavily barred!"

He flung himself against it. The portal held firmly.

"Prisoners still!" murmured Ned,

An instant later Bob exclaimed:

"Hark! Some one's coming!"

Footsteps on the rocky floor echoed through the dark tunnel and cave.

CHAPTER XXV

SAVING THE BANK

STANDING in their dark dungeon, the boys listened with fast-beating hearts as the footsteps came nearer.

"Help! Help!" suddenly cried Bob Dexter. "Let us out! Unbar the door!"

"What's the use of appealing to those crooks?" asked Ned. bitterly.

"These aren't the crooks," Bob exclaimed.

"How do you know?" asked Harry. "They locked us in and they're not likely to let us out just for the asking."

"I tell you it isn't the men of the red auto!" cried Bob. And again he appealed: "Help! Help!"

Suddenly a voice replied:

"I'm coming, boys! I'm coming! Just a moment!"

"Bob! How did you know?" gasped Ned.

Before the young detective could answer there was a fumbling at the bar of the door. It was pulled away and the portal swung open.

"Uncle Jason!" cried Ned as, in the glare of

a lantern held by their rescuer, the boys recognized Mr. Bardley.

"How did you get here?" asked Ned.

"I didn't exactly *get* here, I was *brought*," said the old man. "The men who kidnapped me brought me here soon after they caught me. I've been a prisoner ever since. But we managed to get out just a little while ago and we were going out when we heard you call."

"We! We!" exclaimed Bob.

"Yes. Murchison is here with me," said Mr. Bardley. "Show yourself, Murchison," he called and from the gloomy shadows beyond the direct rays of the lantern there stepped forth the boat mechanic.

"How did you get here?" asked Ned.

"Kidnapped and brought here, same as your uncle was," Murchison answered. "They sneaked up on me when I was repairing the *Sunfish* motor, knocked me out, towed the boat out of the cove so the noise of the motor, after they started it, wouldn't carry to you lads, and then they brought me here. The motor wasn't as badly damaged as I thought, and I had it in running shape soon after you boys went ashore. I was getting ready to go after you and tell you it was all right, when they pounced on me."

"You mean those men in the red auto?" asked Bob.

"Those are the scoundrels."

"Did they sneak up on you in a boat?" inquired

Bob, anxious to clear up all ends of the mystery.

"Some of 'em did, two, in fact, and two came at me from the island shore."

"Then they must have been on the island at the same time we were," said Ned.

"Not exactly *on* the island, but *under* it, in this cave and tunnel," Murchison explained.

"How could that be?" asked Bob as he and his chums drank some water and chaffed their wrists cut by their bonds. "They couldn't get on the island from either end of the tunnel without swimming or using a boat."

"Yes they could!" broke in Mr. Bardley. "This is a trick island. There's a sort of well-shaft leading up from this cave to a hill on top of, and in the middle of the island. Two of the men who attacked Murchison went up this shaft, came out on top of the hill, walked down it to the shore where the *Sunfish* was anchored in the cove, and, wading out, helped the two men in the boat to capture my boat and Murchison."

"That accounts for it!" exclaimed Bob.

"For what?" his chum wanted to know.

"For the ghost voices that fisherman, Bart Thorberg heard. He was at the top of the shaft and the voices of the crooks, talking in this cave, floated up to him. It's very simple."

"It is when you know the how of it," Harry said. "But I still don't understand, Bob, how you knew it was Ned's uncle walking around in here when you called for help just now."

"I didn't know it was Ned's uncle," admitted the young detective, "but I was sure it couldn't be any of the red auto men. In the first place they wouldn't have returned so soon, and in the second place these footsteps we heard were hesitating as if the one walking did not know his way very well. This wouldn't be the case of the four crooks. I assumed, therefore, that it was some one strange to the cave and I called for help."

"Smart boy!" murmured Ned.

"I don't know much about the cave," admitted Mr. Bardley. "But I overheard the men who captured me talking about a central shaft leading up and when Murchison was brought in and made a prisoner with me, he confirmed what I had already suspected."

"Where did they hold you prisoners?" asked Ned.

"Back there." His uncle pointed to a gloomy shaft leading out of the cave, which seemed to be like the hub of a wheel, with several tunnel-like openings radiating from it. "They shut us in a little cave back of the same kind of a door as that where you boys were, and it took us some time to work it open. Luckily Murchison had some tools in his pockets when he was captured and they came in handy. We were just going to try and work our way out, up the central shaft, when we heard you calling for help."

"It's a good thing you did," Bob said. "For if you had gone up the central shaft you'd still be

on the island, with no way of getting off, unless Thorberg, or some other fisherman happened to see you. As it is, we can go out through the tunnel and soon be on either the Portchester or the Clayville shore."

"Do you mean there's a tunnel right under the lake, from shore to shore, beneath Rattlesnake Island?" asked Mr. Bardley.

"That's what there is!" Bob said. "Why, you were brought in that way, in the auto. You must have seen it."

"No," said Ned's uncle, "I didn't. I was blindfolded. I wondered how they got the red auto down in this cave. So it was through the tunnel?"

"That's it," Bob said. "They have a regular prison here. They must have been working on it for some time."

"They blindfolded me, too, after they took me out of the *Sunfish* on the main shore and put me in the red auto," Murchison said. "They wanted to keep the tunnel secret, I guess. How did you boys locate it?"

"Ask Bob," chuckled Harry. "He's the detective in charge."

"Hum! A tunnel under the lake, from Portchester to Clayville," mused Mr. Bardley. "So that's why their car seemed to fly across the lake."

"That's how they did it," Bob affirmed.

"But what does it all mean?" cried Ned. "Are those fellows bootleggers?"

"They're after bigger game than that!" cried

Bob, "and it's time we got busy if we want to balk them."

"What game is it?" Harry demanded.

"The Portchester bank!" cried Bob. "They're on their way to rob it now. They only waited to get us out of the way as they already had your uncle, Ned, and Murchison. With us cooped up they had the coast clear. Now we've got to hustle to save the bank."

"They can't rob my bank!" cried the old man. "I thought, once, that this was their plan. But the time lock and the vault will cheat them."

"No it won't!" Bob fairly shouted. "They're going to try some other method. And from what I've seen here of natural caves and tunnels, I think they must have found another one that leads under the bank. They'll blow up the floor of the vault. That's the most vulnerable spot. There's no time lock on the floor and no steel, only a thin concrete floor, isn't there, Mr. Bardley?" he asked.

"That's all," the banker admitted. "We never thought it necessary to fortify the floor—never thought robbers would come in that way."

"Well, that's the way they're going to try to come, I'm sure!" exclaimed Bob. "That's why they wanted you to sell them your shack, Mr. Bardley, so they could work inside it and go down through it, get into some natural tunnel or shaft, or even one they might partly excavate. The shack would serve as a screen. They're probably there

now, tunneling to get under the bank vault and blow it up. It won't take much nitro-glycerine to break the concrete floor and then they can loot the vault and come out through the tunnel and shack. They'll bring the money here and hide until it's safe to make a getaway. Come on, we have no time to lose!"

"Not certain, but pretty sure," Ned said. "Everything points to that—the shack is on a hill above the bank. The country around here seems honeycombed with tunnels and caves."

"Yes, there's a tunnel, or shaft, under the floor of my shack!" cried Mr. Bardley. "I thought it was only an old well and I had it boarded over—I saw it there when I bought the place years ago. How these men knew about it is more than I can tell."

"That goes for me, too," Bob admitted. "But know it they do and they're going to take advantage of it. How much more digging they'll have to go to get under the bank I don't know, but we'd better not lose any more time talking. We've got to act to save the bank!"

"Come on!" shouted Mr. Bardley. "This is the strangest thing I ever heard of! But those men are desperate. Look how they kidnapped me and Murchison and then nabbed you boys."

"We walked into their trap," Ned stated.

"And we're going to run out!" added Bob. "Come on! We've got to hurry!"

They made the best possible speed out through

the tunnel emerging on the Portchester shore just where Bob had led his chums into the slanting shaft under the earth—the shaft that passed beneath the lake.

Wearied and worn by their imprisonment, the captives hastened first to the nearest garage where they hired a fast auto, for Ned's car was too far away to be of service. Then they drove to the police station where the amazing story was related to the astonished Chief.

"Bank robbers, eh?" he cried. "I'll take my whole force and round 'em up!"

"You'd better swear in some deputies," suggested Mr. Bardley. "You haven't got any too many men, Toomey, and these crooks are desperate. We'll stop at the bank, leave a guard there and—"

"Get some tear-gas bombs if you have any," broke in Bob.

"Yes, we have some," Ned's uncle admitted. "I laid in a stock after the bank in Fayetteville was held up three years ago. But what do you want the tear-gas for, Bob?"

"To bring those crooks out of the shack-tunnel—that is if they haven't already blown up the bank."

"They haven't done that yet or I'd heard of it!" the Chief said. The bank was not far from police headquarters.

A visit to the bank confirmed what he said. The explosion had not yet taken place. A guard was

left outside the institution and then the remainder of the police force, with some special deputies and the boys and Mr. Bardley, with Murchison went to the old shack on the hill. It was closed and ominously quiet as they neared it.

"Say, we can't get in—I've left the key home," Mr. Bardley exclaimed.

"I've got a skeleton key," Bob said, and produced it.

As the door was opened, the police with drawn automatics standing ready, the truth of what Bob had guessed was revealed. The floor was torn up revealing a gaping hole leading into the earth. A moment of listening followed and the sound of digging could be heard.

"They're working away!" said Bob. "Chief, better use the tear gas bombs!"

Several of these distressing but comparatively harmless affairs were tossed down the shaft and the beseigers went outside for a moment. In a few seconds cries and frantic yells were shouted up the shaft into the shack and, in a few minutes, there came staggering out the four men of the red auto—their hands held above their heads and tears streaming from their eyes.

"They've got us!" snarled the one known to the boys as the Gorilla. "Fair caught!"

"Put the bracelets on 'em!" commanded the Chief and in a few more seconds the four crooks were secured. They were too weak from the ef

fects of the tear-gas to make any resistance and were soon locked in cells.

"Well, Bob Dexter, we've got to hand it to you again," said Harry as the three were on their way back to the Bardley mansion where they found George on guard but considerably worried and anxious.

"How did you figure it all out?" asked Ned.

"Part of it was figured for me," said Bob, modestly. "There are some points I don't yet understand—for instance why did you have that air-tight closet in the shack, Mr. Bardley."

"Oh, I had some idea of storing old bank papers in it—papers that were of no particular value but which I wanted to save," the old man said. "It was just a whim of mine."

"Well, that's explained," Bob said. "That's all that really puzzled me since I found out about the tunnel, cave, the hole in the hill where the ghost voices were heard and the fact that shack covered another shaft leading downward. I just put two and two together and—"

"You got four crooks!" interrupted Ned.

"Well, yes," Bob admitted with a grin.

The four prisoners, who, it was soon established, had long criminal records, disclosed some of their own scheme under the fierce examinations to which they were subjected. In brief their story was this.

One of their number was an expert geologist who had taken the wrong path. It was he who,

some time before, had discovered the tunnel under the lake, the cave beneath the island, the shaft leading up through the hill and the secondary series of shafts and holes which, it was found, did lead directly under the bank vault.

After that the criminal geologist met others of his kind and the bank robbery was planned. But it was necessary to get possession of the shack so the movements of the robbers would be screened from observation. Having tried unsuccessfully to buy it from Mr. Bardley the crooks, who went under various aliases, decided on intimidation. They started on a campaign of fear against the old bank president, guessing, rightly, that his age would make him imagine more, perhaps, than actually happened. So they made veiled threats against him, carried on their terrorizing campaign and by flashing back and forth in the red car, appearing now in Clayville and again in Portchester, made their actions seem little less than those savoring of witchcraft.

Finding Mr. Bardley more of a fighter than they had bargained on, they were forced to direct action after he hired George Murchison, got the motor boat and barricaded his mansion. The robbers fired on Ned's auto, cut Mr. Bardley's telephone and by a bold move they captured him and then caught Murchison. They were planning some means of getting Bob and his chums out of the way when the boys unwittingly walked into the tunnel cave. The rest was comparatively easy of

accomplishment or near-accomplishment. Leaving their prisoners, as they supposed, securely confined, the robbers hastened to the shack and climbed down the shaft which, having sides of rough projecting rocks, afforded them a natural stairway.

They planned after a little needful digging to blow up the floor of the bank vault that night. The explosives were found in the shack shaft after the tear-gas fumes had been drifted out so the police could enter.

"Well, I guess that's all there is to it," Ned remarked as, over a bountiful meal prepared by George in the old mansion, the boys and Mr. Bardley, with Murchison, discussed the various aspects of the mystery, now completely solved.

"It's all over," Harry chuckled. "Gee! But those fellows were surprised when they came out with tears in their eyes."

"I only hope they didn't damage the *Sunfish*," remarked Bob.

"No, she's all right. I know where they left her," said Murchison.

"Then maybe we can use it the rest of our vacation," suggested Ned.

"You can have the boat!" exclaimed his uncle. "I owe you boys, especially Bob, more than the cost of the boat for saving the bank."

"Ned and Harry did their share," said the young detective.

"I wonder where the red auto is?" murmured Ned. "It's some car!"

"You can have that, too!" his uncle said. "I spoke to the police about it and they're willing."

"Gee! Then I'll scrap the flivver!" cried Ned, joyfully.

"We're pretty well set for the rest of the summer—a speedy car and a motor boat!" murmured Harry.

"Even if the car does look like a fire engine!" chuckled Bob.

"We should worry," murmured Ned.

And so the mystery of the red auto came to an end, thanks to Bob Dexter's clever work. And when his chums asked him what case he was going to take up next he only smiled. But that the young detective would find some other outlet for his talents can not be doubted, though his future exploits must be reserved for another volume.

THE END

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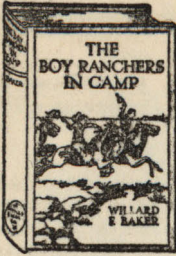
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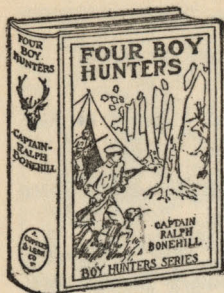
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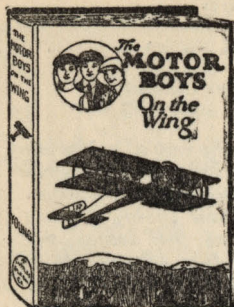
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